

“Money Talks”
James 2:1-10, 14-17

Today is Labor Day Sunday when we are encouraged to celebrate the value of work and the rights of workers. This great tradition was started in 1882. It did not become a national holiday until 1894 after the deaths of a number of workers at the hands of the US military and US Marshals during the Pullman Strike. In the aftermath of that strike, President Grover Cleveland put reconciliation with Labor as a top political priority and made Labor Day a national holiday. We are thankful that through the efforts of the labor movement, workers gained many rights and protections. Yet, as we reflect on the value of work, I can't help but think of the suffering of many who have lost their jobs recently and those who work hard for little pay. What comes to my mind when I think of Labor Day is a book entitled, *Nickel and Dimed; On (not) Getting By in America* (2001) by Barbara Ehrenreich. In this book, Ehrenreich documents her six-month experience in trying to make it by working as an unskilled but fully employed wage earner. In Florida she worked as a waitress on the 2:00-10PM shift, then as a house cleaner for Molly Maid. In Maine she worked as a “dietary aide” at a nursing home and as a hotel maid. In Minnesota she clerked at Wal-Mart, the largest private employer in the nation with 825,000 people on the payroll. Although she admits that her experiment was artificial in many ways, Ehrenreich lived in budget motels and dangerous trailer parks. She ate only what she could afford (which tended to be fast food) and she discovered that she really needed two such unskilled jobs just to meet her basic needs. She found herself physically and emotionally drained. All of that without even having to worry about being sick and trying to afford medical care. What the book showed is that people who work hard don't always have their basic needs met. In fact, those in that category in our country are about 30% of the American work force who earn less than \$10 per hour (cf. the Economic Policy Institute). They are the people we pass every day who make our American way of life possible. They clean our office buildings at night, serve us at restaurants, repair our cars, sew our designer garments, and handpick our fresh produce. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, “in the median state a minimum wage worker would have to work 89 hours each week to afford a two-bedroom apartment at 30% of his or her income, which is the federal definition of affordable housing.”

In his book *The Working Poor; Invisible in America*, Pulitzer Prize winner David Shipler talks about the tremendous challenges that face the working poor showing how they are caught up in a cycle of hopelessness, “A run-down apartment can exacerbate a child's asthma, which leads to a call for an ambulance, which generates a medical bill that cannot be paid, which ruins a credit record, which hikes the interest rate on an auto loan, which forces the purchase of an unreliable used car, which jeopardizes a mother's punctuality at work, which limits her promotions and earning capacity, which confines her to poor housing.”

So how do we as Christians live in a world where there is such exploitation and disparity? One of the major challenges that we face today is that we live in a world where money talks and where human worth is equated with personal wealth. We are swayed and even bombarded by cultural messages that say that those with more money are more important than those with less money. But if we take the gospel of Christ seriously, we can see that God is in fact more concerned about those who are considered insignificant in society. In all fairness, I have to say that not all of us believe that money talks. But sometimes we feel helpless in the face of such terrible challenges. Yet, the call of the gospel does not let us rest with that sense of helplessness. It does not let us ignore the burden this kind of situation puts on us as followers of Christ. No matter where we are on the political or social spectrum, whether we ourselves are rich or poor, liberal or conservative, proactive or passive, our faith in Christ moves us to deal with the pain of our world. This is clear from our Bible passage this morning from the book of

James. In fact, the letter of James considers those who profess their faith in Jesus yet do not live up to it to be lacking in their faith. In 2:1-13, the author of the letter says that a preference for the rich rather than the poor is a betrayal of the law of love. In 2:14-16, he shows how the refusal of help to those in need is in fact a sign of an empty faith. God's concern for the poor is an essential given throughout the scripture (cf. Deut. 10:18; Ps. 68:5; Amos 2:6-7; Luke 1:51-53; 6:20). God has particular compassion toward the poor, and as God's people, so should we. That unique choice of the poor is not because there is something uniquely blessed about being poor, but rather the absence of worldly goods often creates a greater dependence upon God and a willingness to be open to God's leading. There is also God's concern about justice in the world. We have to be careful to remember that being poor in this passage is not of one category. Biblical scholar Gay Byron writes in her commentary on James that, "The poor could be either the *ptochoi*, the beggars who totally lacked the means of subsistence and lived from alms, or the *penetoi*, those who at least had a job but owned no property. Thus, this passage and other related texts...indicate the diverse socioeconomic composition of the early Christian community." God's concern for the poor and for justice is not about some romantic view of poverty, it is about the complex nature of our lives where having a job does not always mean that you are not poor.

This sense of God's preference for the poor is hard for us to understand fully. A common understanding of faith is that if you are preferred or blessed by God, then God will bless you with good health and material resources. But what about those who are poor? Are they cursed? What about those who live with disabilities? What about those who suffer innocently? Are the people in California who are dealing with wild fires less blessed than us? In a book entitled *Preaching Justice*, one of the articles written by Rev. Kathy Black tells about her experience of being a person who has a physical disability, "A friend who recently celebrated her sixty-third birthday told me that God has 'blessed' her with good health. It is true. She is in great health and has lots of physical and mental energy for whatever tasks she undertakes. But the corresponding belief to that statement is that I am somehow cursed by God because my health at a much younger age is fraught with episodes of severe muscle weakness and paralysis...Though the Christian message involves 'taking up one's cross,' there is still an underlying belief that being a Christian entitles one to God's blessings and abundance. Living with a disability is not perceived to be one of 'God's blessings.'"

How do we live a faith that actually shows us that God blesses the poor and those who are more on the margins of society? I think the first thing is to be aware of our cultural assumptions of what constitutes a blessing and what constitutes a curse. What do we really mean when we say that we are blessed? Is being blessed about getting good things from the divine slot machine or is it about the presence of God being with us? In the Bible, the Hebrew word for blessing, *barakh*, or the Greek word *eulogeo* usually refer to divine favor on human beings. The Hebrew word actually also means to kneel. In that culture and time, kneeling was associated with humility. It was not about getting more power. It was about being emptied of power. So, God's blessing meant an emptying, a humbling, and a reaching down kind of presence. It was used to show God's presence and active participation in the lives of people. Certainly in our scripture for today from James we know that God's blessing is not about granting wishes and giving material goods. God's blessing is about God's love that reverses our social standards of power and discrimination. If our culture says that money talks, our faith says, God's love talks. This love is not dependent on whether a person is "worthy" of love or not. This love comes from the heart of God that does not show favoritism. As Dorothy Day put it, "I really only love God as much as I love the person I love the least."

This is not easy work, but it is the challenge of our faith. A few years ago, I found a button from a youth ministry group called Logos that I really loved. It said, "You are a child of God and I will treat you that way." It is a hard button to wear around, especially when I know that I am going to a place where there are people that are hard to love.

A story is told about an incident that happened during the thirties in New York City, on one of the coldest days of the year. The world was in the grip of the Great Depression, and all over the city, the poor were close to starvation. It happened that the judge was sitting on the bench that day, hearing a complaint against a woman who was charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She pleaded that her daughter was sick, and her grandchildren were starving, because their father had abandoned the family. But the shopkeeper, whose loaf had been stolen, refused to drop the charge. He insisted that an example be made of the poor old woman, as a deterrent to others. The judge sighed. He was most reluctant to pass judgment on the woman, yet he had no alternative. "I'm sorry," he turned to her. "But I can't make any exceptions. The law is the law. I sentence you to a fine of ten dollars, and if you can't pay I must send you to jail for ten days." The woman was heartbroken, but even as he was passing sentence, the judge was reaching into his pocket for the money to pay off the ten-dollar fine. He took off his hat, tossed the ten-dollar bill into it, and then addressed the crowd: "I am also going to impose a fine of fifty cents on every person here present in this courtroom, for living in a town where a person has to steal bread to save her grandchildren from starvation. Please collect the fines, Mr. Bailiff, in this hat, and pass them across to the defendant." And so the accused went home that day from the courtroom with forty-seven dollars and fifty cents –fifty cents of which had been paid by the shame-faced grocery store keeper who had brought the charge against her. And as she left the courtroom, the gathering of petty criminals and New York policemen gave the judge a standing ovation.

Faith without works is dead! May your faith be always alive that even though money talks in our world, the sound of God's love is always louder! Amen.