

## **To Labor In Love**

*A Sermon for Labor Day Preached by Pilar Millhollen, September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2018*

*Readings: "Keep Going" (Edgar A. Guest); The Letter of James, 1:17 – 27*

*Are you tired? I'm tired. I'm tired of the endless scandals. I'm tired of politics approached as a circus that's stomping out our most crucial laws and our ethical foundations. But mostly I'm tired of what it's doing to the most vulnerable folks in our land. Separating families, incarcerating innocent people, raising taxes on people who are just getting by. Fewer voting rights now than in 1965. Depending on where you're standing, it either looks like we're falling apart or we're about to know what we're really made of. James seemed to have a pretty good grasp on this. He doesn't mince words, does he? Nope, he cuts right to the heart of the matter, blunt in his directives on faith and deeds. James is immediate, urgent. And for this reason this letter has always been my favorite in the New Testament; like the most fiery of the prophets of old, its concern is not with doctrine or belief, but with what authentic faith does to a soul to transform it into an embodied reflection of God's justice. It's concerned not with what's safest, not with maintaining the status quo, but in what transformation looks like in its radical risk taking ways. At the same time, it's also firmly rooted in the traditions of Israel and the law of Torah – it draws upon the rich history of the God of Exodus, a God of liberation – but infuses new life, a new lens, into God's vision for humanity. Martin Luther famously called the letter of James a "straw epistle," for it's read as downplaying the power of faith as an internal form of salvation – but for folks like me, raised under the UU flag of an equity-seeking, justice-loving people, the lessons of James light a fire in the soul like a second wind for a weary runner in a race that's far from over. James is a sort of rogue Jewish Christian with prophetically strong opinions about two primary issues: classism, and speech. In other words, how the rich treat – or should be treating – the poor, and how people of faith are – or aren't – walking their talk. In the midst of what seems to be a bottomless pit of downward spiraling in our government policies and our leaders, it is apt that our lectionary has given us this passage today that strikes at the heart of hypocrisy in word and deed. It is also apt given that we as a nation take the first Monday in September as a holiday off from working, a tradition that celebrates the liberation of working and middle class laborers from the bonds of unfair working hours and conditions. A tradition that has been all but lost in our current climate, where minimum wage ceases to cover the basic needs of the American citizen. Since this day now marks the end of the summer months with a nod to the beginning school year, over decades the meaning of how this day originated, and the veracity of the folks that it honors has faded into the background. What would our lives look like without the labor movement and the massive resistance of an exploited class of people?*

*For most of the nineteenth century, unions were fairly weak and had little pull on the national scene. It was the economy of the robber baron: the Carnegies, the Rockefellers, JP Morgan. Driven by the industrial revolution's profit off hard labor that came cheap and demanded long hours, the laboring class was in a terrible position: without a critical mass of union demands, and the physical and economic strain of 60 – 70 hour work weeks, how could individuals concretely shift the oppressive reality of such a lifestyle? Well, they couldn't – and not enough people of the wealthier classes had a moral stake in the lives of the vulnerable. We know this is nothing new, of course, but simply a continuation of the indentured servitude and slave legacy that cast a long shadow upon our social systems up to today. Fortunately, as inherently moral creatures, we have the capacity and have historically risen up against forces of domination when we can no longer live with what is an unlivable situation. The first gatherings*

*of workers that became what we know as Labor Day began as strikes and protests. Union workers realized that while they were weak divided, if they reached out to each other sharing the common concern for fair hours, living wages, and decent working conditions, they could and would change the system. And a transformation occurred; but at great cost. In 1886, a protest and rally in Chicago's Haymarket Square grew violent when someone threw a bomb at police. Many were injured; at least 8 people died. The sad irony of this protest was that it was in response to the wounding and killing of several workers just the day before by Chicago police during a labor strike at McCormick Reaper Works. For every major stride forward in legislation, a price was paid in blood as strikes often turned tumultuous. Ever heard of the old Pullman rail cars? In May of 1894, employees at the Pullman Palace Car Company in Chicago went on strike to protest wage cuts and the firing of their union representatives. This strike went national the next month when activist Eugene V. Debs led the American Railroad Union in a boycott of all Pullman railway cars, bringing the railroad industry to a dead halt. In order to break the strike, the federal government sent in troops – ending in riots and the deaths of over a dozen laborers. May their lives be honored and their sacrifice remembered on this day.*

*We often look back at our history in our fight to enable the right, and the ability, to vote for every individual in our nation. When a person who is able and available to vote in any major election says, "I didn't vote," or "why would I vote, I don't like these candidates?" I usually look them square in the eye and reply, "People died for our right to vote in this country." But so they did as well for work. The labor movement, which like all movements arose from that inner voice that bubbles up under the distress of persecution, the voice that cries, "this is not right, and must be made right," this movement deserves the same attention. An attention that looks backward at who and what has come before us in order to move forward toward a life abundant. Forward toward that day when greed and avarice no longer reign in the heart of a culture obsessed with excess while most of us struggle to make ends meet.*

*The sacrifices made by the labor movement were broad, and they were deep. But all movements that demand justice for a people oppressed cannot survive without a testing of one's commitment, a test that often comes in the form of sacrifice – sacrifice of resources, of time, of convenience. The real test comes not in our intentions to make a difference, but in how we show up. Not in what we say we want to do or who we are, but what we are willing to give up. It's all over the gospel in Jesus' words and deeds, but where it may be easy to justify his ministry as separate from what we're called to, James hits us over the head with it. He addresses the Jesus followers with impunity, his words ringing out with an inner fire that propels a body into action, that instigates the kind of courage needed to jump into the fray despite its risks. And it's not easy to hear. Not because he's preaching fire and brimstone, but because he's asking us to take a hard look in the mirror. "Be doers of the word," he declares, "and not merely hearers who deceive themselves...those who look into the perfect Law, the Law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act – they will be blessed in their doing." Well, of course, we might respond, we're not any good for our word if we don't follow through; if we don't reflect in our behavior what our radical faith asks of us. But there's a delicate balance between how we take care of ourselves by nurturing our individual faith journeys, our personal relationship to the divine spirit, and how we act upon what that does to us. Paul's theology of "justification by faith," which came to be associated with Martin Luther's idea that Christianity was about faith in Jesus alone without works – this was never a singular theology in scripture; it was ever and always paired with the immediate attention to a lived ministry that cared for those suffering from the inequities of empire. James simply takes it one step further. He goes out on a*

*limb to say, what would it look like if we cast aside everything else so our primary expression of faith was about outreach to the most vulnerable members of society? What if it looked like taking the risk that we want to take but always choose not to for fear of our own discomfort, our own inconvenience, our own sacrifice?*

*The latest edition of UU World showed up on our doorstep the other day. UU World is the Unitarian Universalist Association's denominational magazine, and it cuts a broad swath across any and every concern that the 7 principles of the faith call its community into. There's a copy on the credenza that I welcome you to look at during coffee hour, but this edition immediately caught my eye with its bold cover: "This is No Time for a Casual Faith," it said, and I thought, brother James' spirit lives on in our multiple faiths. One story features the multiple ministers and congregants who are audaciously opening their homes to refugees in detention, while others work on dismantling the money bail system that's incarcerating our siblings of color at a swift and wildly disproportional rate. The cover story, entitled "This is No Time for a Casual Faith," features the recent address by UUA president Susan Frederick-Gray at General Assembly. General Assembly is the annual meeting for UUs across the country, held to strengthen the bonds of fellowship and address what the world's deep need calls us into as people of an open faith. Rev. Susan recalls what's happened in the last year: immediately after she moved to Boston last summer to take on her new position, the call came for faith leaders to show up in Charlottesville, VA to counter the white supremacist rally that was about to take place in the small town. Local faith leaders knew that this rally would not go peacefully for the people of Charlottesville, and they were right. White supremacists marched upon the campus of University of Virginia the night before the rally and assaulted members of the Black Student Alliance. They blocked the doors of a church down the street where faith leaders were worshipping together. And the next day, she and many other faith and lay leaders from different traditions were put directly in harm's way when the marchers, armed with shields, helmets, bats and sticks, came right toward the group, screaming and chanting hate-filled speech. The police stood by, watching – violence erupting when antifascist groups stepped in to protect the faith leaders as they saw the police unwilling to intervene. Many were injured; Heather Heyer, a young white woman protesting the white nationalists, was killed. There is no glory in such violence. There is no triumph in the loss of life. But neither is there in turning aside when Love calls upon us to resist the forces of evil that threaten to tear apart everything that makes us human. "Being in Charlottesville was terrifying and traumatic," Rev. Susan admits, partially because she recognized as a white woman her own privilege in the expectation that the police would protect her. So it goes for all of those who answer the call of a faith embodied in ushering in a more just order against the disorder of racism, sexism, classism, homophobia and xenophobia. "I knew," she says, "that it is not enough to intellectually want to change the world, then shrink when that change calls us to take risks, to show up and follow that challenging call at the heart of our faith to embody the fierceness of love in the face of hate and violence." What if those who came before us shrank at the monolithic problem of voting rights? What if those who came before us ignored the violence of the Vietnam War? Or turned away from the horrors of strange fruit hanging on southern trees? What if those who came before us, low-wage workers and children toiling in sweatshops and losing their health, their dignity, and their lives because of their work, what if they never said, "I've had enough, and I deserve better. We deserve better. Our children and our children's children deserve better, and if we do not rise up for ourselves, and for the generations to come, who will do it for us?" Yes, it's tiring. Yes, it takes a kind of spiritual fortitude to envision the long haul and not the short term. It takes a kind of holy witness*

*to bear with the continuous challenges. But what sustains us through that exhaustion and disappointment and also excitement and hope is the community in which our faith takes shape, and grows, and holds us accountable to be doers as well as hearers of the word. To take the words of James not just to heart, but to hand, knowing that we, as Rev. Derrick Harkins says, “are the beneficiaries of what is not sensible, what is not practical, but what is audacious, revolutionary, and radical.” It took decades, generations, to fight enslavement, for the right to vote, for equal education and fair wages, for women to work in the same positions as men...and we’re still fighting. But look what the struggle has birthed – the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union), the Southern Poverty Law Center, the Women’s Refugee Commission, the AFL-CIO which is the result of what our Labor Day ancestors fought for – and so many more. We are the beneficiaries of what is *not* sensible, what is *not* practical, but what is audacious. And revolutionary. And radical. We haven’t gotten to the mountaintop yet, no, we do not fool ourselves – but what counts is that we continue climbing. What counts is that we say absolutely not to forces of domination that steal our humanity and the humanity of our neighbors. What counts, as we celebrate this Labor Day, is that we stay in it. In the struggle. In the muck. Laboring where we can, when we can, and taking our rest when it calls to our weary bodies and souls; leaning upon a community that will lift us up when we falter and push us forward when we need it. But most of all, sustained by a divine presence that was there with our ancestors that forged our path, that is here in our midst, and will be there on the road, as we labor on in its audacious, revolutionary, and radical Love.*