

**“Hearers and Doers”**  
**James 1:17-27**  
**Andrew Foster Connors**  
**15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – Labor Day Weekend**  
**September 2, 2018**

The average person will spend over 90,000 hours of her life at work. That’s roughly 1/3 of your waking hours spent laboring.<sup>1</sup> And that’s just counting the work that you are paid for. Labor Day weekend is a good day to ask the question – what are you doing with your life? How are you spending the energy that you’ve been given? The writer of the book of James doesn’t use the word vocation but he does start with the truth that our lives are gifts. We didn’t earn them. We were given them. The fact of your life is evidence of God’s generous, creative nature and to God’s purposes for us – to extend generosity into the world.

It’s that bedrock purpose that gives shape to our vocation – for how we use the limited gift of time we’ve been given over the course of a life. When it comes to paid work it means exercising choices that we might have carefully so that we spend our lives in ways similar to how we received them – as gifts to God’s world and God’s creatures. When our choices are limited it means steering your workplace toward God’s purposes in so far as you are able. When it comes to the earth it means arranging our lives to preserve and nurture the life that sustains more than just yours or mine. Whether paid or unpaid, volunteer work or just the daily neighborly vocation it means contributing to God’s purposes in the world.

Of course, deciding what contributes to God’s purposes in the world requires discernment which is probably why James emphasizes listening so much. Anger and speaking are contrasted with listening. “Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.” Neither anger nor speaking are negative things. But they follow listening to the “implanted word.” We’ve been given two ears and one mouth, the old teaching goes, and we should use them in the same proportions.

We often think about vocation as involving significant, life-charting decisions. A choice to attend college and if you do, where to go. A choice of a line of work. A choice of a city or company. A choice to have children. A choice to retire. These are certainly big vocational decisions. But James impresses upon me how vocational choices are the constant spiritual work of our lives. They are less a matter of choice and more a matter of listening – listening to God’s direction for our lives.

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<sup>1</sup> One Gettysburg College researcher asserts that the average person spends 1/3 of their life working - [http://www.gettysburg.edu/news\\_events/press\\_release\\_detail.dot?id=79db7b34-630c-4f49-ad32-4ab9ea48e72b](http://www.gettysburg.edu/news_events/press_release_detail.dot?id=79db7b34-630c-4f49-ad32-4ab9ea48e72b) A more detailed analysis from the UK comes up with a figure of 35% of “waking hours.” <https://revisesociology.com/2016/08/16/percentage-life-work/>. On the other end of the spectrum, one study argues that we spent less than 10% of our lives working, the lowest percentage of work in history. Much depends on how one defines work and where one falls in the mean for hours worked during a week or year. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/what-stress-only-10-of-life-is-spent-at-work-btr0p2skh> All of these analyses are based on Western notions of what constitutes work.

It's easy for an active congregation like ours to skip over that discernment work and go straight to the action – “be doers of the word,” James says, “and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.” The emphasis is on the action. This is the author who says, memorably, “Faith without works is dead.” It would be easy to conclude that James privileges action over listening. But James starts with the listening. Hearing the Word gives us direction on what action we are called to take. Absent of that listening, actions can take more sinister turns. It was Aquinas who argued that evil only succeeds by disguising itself as good.

Hannah Arendt wrote of this evil that she witnessed in Adolf Eichmann, one of the main organizers of the Holocaust. After observing his trial, Arendt argued that Eichmann was not a monster as many had made him out to be, but rather an ordinary man – a middle class sales clerk – who found meaning for himself in his role in the Nazi party. His actions were clouded not by malice, her controversial argument went, but by blind dedication to a regime and a fierce need to belong. It was his thoughtlessness – the lack of thinking through the death wrought by his own actions – that was at the root of evil. Arendt's attempt was not to excuse Eichmann's evil but to understand its roots – that human atrocities stem from blind allegiance to ideologies that provide a sense of meaning in a lonely world. The worst of evil is not the result of the deranged, but the result of thoughtless zealotry.

I'm not sure if Arendt is entirely right about Eichmann and the Holocaust but I do hear her concern that when we attribute obviously evil acts to the psychological derangement of other people, we distance ourselves from the danger of being caught up in it ourselves. I think about her words in relationship to the evil I see in the world today. The abuse of children by priests in Pennsylvania. What if the actions of the bishops who covered it up had been driven less by allegiance to an institution more by the ideals for which it stands? Or the unquestioning support that some are giving to our sitting President who says without shame that the Justice Department's job should be total loyalty to him instead of upholding the law. I agree with Candidate Trump's assessment that he could shoot someone in the middle of 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue NY and his core supporters would still defend him. I just think it's more evidence for Arendt's observation that the worst of evil might not always be the result of the deranged. It could be the result of blind allegiance to ideologies or egoists, whose antidote is a deeper sort of thinking.

Which is why we need to discern as much as we act and act according to what we discern from the Word of God. The book of James concludes that the Word of God leads the faithful to care for orphans and widows and keep oneself unstained by the world. Widows and orphans were people made most vulnerable by the unjust arrangements of the society at that time. Today that could include the poor who, statistics tell us, have a nearly impossible time becoming not poor. It could extend to African-Americans in relationship to inequitable treatment by police, a prison system that exploded just at the time segregation was ending. It could extend to people with disabilities still considered less than instead of simply differently abled, to the immigrant children separated from their parents or the LGBTQ Christians who even now the Church tries to scapegoat as disordered, the source of its division.

It is the Word that we hear that leads us to act in relationship with those who are most vulnerable. The Word centers us in discerning the good in world that often misses the mark. This is our corporate vocation as church. It is our personal vocation as disciples of Jesus. But it takes work to keep discernment and action in balance.

Johnny Ray Youngblood, a Baptist pastor in east Brooklyn, NY gave an address 20 years ago that has shaped my thinking on this topic more than any other. A healthy democratic life and a healthy religious life, he said, depend profoundly on the presence and balance of habits of thinking, habit of listening (relating) and habits of acting. Too much thinking without acting is not enough. It's like those hearers of the word that James writes about who forget who they are and don't act. But too much acting without thinking is dangerously susceptible to giving blind allegiance to something other than God, something other than what is good. And not enough listening leads to too much stereotyping of other people without ever relating to them.<sup>2</sup>

James guards against thoughtless action taken by religious people on the one hand, and an empty faith full of words but no action on the other. A balance between hearing the Word in text and flesh, and doing the Word in truth and action. Between listening, relating and acting.

If you watched parts of Aretha Franklin's or John McCain's funerals, these are qualities often lifted up as virtues - essential qualities for disciples of Jesus - thinking through the impact of decisions instead of blindly following others, relating to people different from yourself, acting on the basis of your God-given calls.

Labor Day was established as a holiday to celebrate the labor movement. Those workers who took great risks to bring us such things as the 40 hour work week, the end of child labor, safety standards on the job. They brought about these changes by asking some basic questions about the purpose of work, the purpose of human beings, and the intersection between the two. What are we doing with our lives? How are we spending the energy that we've been given? And what do we need to make sure that the most vulnerable among us find justice instead of only unending work?

Labor Day weekend is an opportunity not only to remember their sacrifices but to ask similar questions of ourselves and of the world we've been given.

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<sup>2</sup> "Religion, Democracy, and Organizing: Remarks by Rev. Johnny Ray Youngblood," November 21, 1998.