

WORD PLAY
Beverly Latif Duncan/NUCC/September 2, 2018
James 1:17-25
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If we were all arrested and charged with the crime of being Christian, would our actions provide sufficient evidence to convict us?

It's really easy to coast along on the words of faith, basking in God's grace, yet...forgetting that the *words* of faith and God's grace come with a *purpose for our lives*: to change, to renew; to heal; to challenge. Those are action words. Changing, renewing, healing, challenging involve *doing*.

The Book of James is a actually collection of Jewish-Christian wisdom materials. The chapters and verses in James emphasize the point that "wisdom" isn't so much about what one *knows* about God, but *how one lives in response* to God. The wisdom that James imparts to us in our scripture reading this morning is that God created us to be fruitful and to fulfill God's purposes. It means that it's fine to listen to, and hear, the word of God, but if you don't *do* the word of God, it's like looking at yourself in the mirror, checking out your hair, and the minute you walk away, according to James, you forget all about it. Whereas, if we look deeply and intensely into the "perfect law" of God, we won't be able to walk away from its breadth and depth, and power, and it will compel us to move and to act.

What *is* that word of God that we are to do? In Christian tradition, it's the Bible; scripture. We express this "word" in our preaching and teaching, and we feel it in how we are stirred, and in our prayers and meditation. In addition, in the Christian Scriptures, *Jesus* is the (cap. W) Word of God, because the nature of God is revealed in the *person* of Jesus Christ---he is the word of God incarnate; God's word demonstrated to us; made visible in the flesh, in Jesus Christ.

But this morning I want to lift up God's words in our *scriptures*, so that there's no mystery about what the Book of James means by wanting us to *do* them; to *act* on God's pleas for human liberty, dignity, and possibility. We've heard powerful witness---on this Labor Day Sunday---from Silvia and Alex about the laborers they represent and the conditions under which they labor. The hard work and advocacy of these two beg us to look, in the

words of James, “into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who *forget* but doers who act...” (v. 25).

Now hear these words: “Twenty-five years ago, men and women harvesting tomatoes first gathered in Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church in Immokalee, to discuss how they would confront violence in the fields. They brought their analytical skills, their creativity, and their courage to bear on what had been seemingly intractable exploitation. They stepped out in faith to create a future that they only envisioned at the time....”

Now hear what God wants us to do, in his charge to Moses: “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.... The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.’ But Moses said to God, ‘Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?’ He said, ‘I will be with you...’” (Ex. 3:7-12). God is always with us.

Hear the words of this story: President Obama awarded the Coalition of Immokalee Workers a Presidential Medal for Extraordinary Efforts to Combat Modern Slavery, at a White House ceremony in 2015. “But sadly, that isn’t the *end* of the story,” a Coalition spokesperson says. “Here in Immokalee, we know the urgency of the problem directly and personally. Outside of the Fair Food Program, we continue to receive and investigate reports from workers who have been beaten or pistol-whipped, forced to work for little or no wages, or driven into debt they are forced to work off at gunpoint.”

And also these words, spoken to us one year ago in this sanctuary in an interfaith service: “In 1997, six farmworkers undertook a fast that lasted more than thirty days in order to wake the conscience of growers about shameful wages and conditions. In doing so, they demonstrated to the world beyond what was then the forgotten town of Immokalee---that behind the red, juicy tomato that appeared on their dinner plate, were men and women facing conditions of grave exploitation.”

Now hear the action word of God to us through the prophet Isaiah about another way to fast: “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?” (Isaiah 58:6). Choose your fast.

A woman named Udilia tells *her* story in these words: “Immokalee is a small town, but it is filled with hard-working and kind people---people who put food on the table for millions of other families. For many years when I worked in the fields, I did not make enough to put food on the table for my three children. Because of the Fair Food program, we started to see better wages---and it changed our lives, for me and my children.”

Here’s the instructive word of God in the deuteronomic laws to live by: “You shall *not* withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land and in one of your towns” (Deut. 24:14).

And in Jesus’ own words as he completes the telling of his parables in Matthew: “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you? ...Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:37-40).

God’s reign and God’s priorities do not stop at the door to the workplace. The church, the body of Christ---us---is called to seek out and *accompany* people wherever they are. So the church must also be in our offices, factories, stores, farms, schools, and *all* the places where people work---especially where human dignity and possibility are missing.

In Immokalee and *all across our country*, workers are mobilizing and making gains. There’s still a long way to go. Let’s resolve today that all jobs will be good jobs, with good pay, good benefits, and good working conditions. Workers need us to care, to accompany, and *join* the struggles. Then, should we ever be arrested and charged with the crime of being Christian, there will be plenty of evidence to convict us. That would truly be something to celebrate on Labor Day---a *fine* reason to take the day off !
Amen.