

# Sermon for Sunday, September 5, 2021 - “Your Labor is Not in Vain”

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Decorah, Iowa  
Amalia Vagts, Preacher

Mark 7:24-37, James 2:1-17

I’ve been watching a lot of Ordination services lately. Ordination is a special rite in the church for rostered ministers of word, sacrament, and service. I’ve been watching so many because I recently graduated from seminary and many of my classmates have been called to ministry settings. (And yes, I hope that I will be too, maybe soon - can I get an Amen?)

One part of the ordination rite that I especially love is when the minister reads these words: “And be of good courage, for God has called you, and your labor in the Lord is not in vain.”

These words - “your labor is not in vain”- fit our texts this morning with a range of examples of work, works, and labor, but also the calendar falling on the Sunday of Labor Day weekend. Although the day has taken on a pretty wide range of meanings from camping to store promotions to fashion advice, Labor Day was set aside to honor the movement to give dignity and rights to workers, as well as to honor the workers themselves.

In current American society, all of us participate in one way or another in the system of work. We are workers, we are bosses. We are without work. Some of us have retired from labor. Some of us are studying to prepare for working. Some of us welcome family members home at the end of the workday. Some work inside and some work outside the home. And some work ON the home.

We work to buy things. We sell things and trade things and want things. This system of working and labor does something to us. It creates opportunity and hope and joy and possibility, and injustice and harm and illness and inhumanity. The system creates winners, losers, great loss, great fortune. Work drives greed and want and feelings of success and favoritism and desperation.

The apostle James talks about not only the results of this system of work, but also the works of love and care done by Christ-followers. And in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus performs works of healing, first to the Syrophencian woman’s daughter, and then to the one who cannot speak clearly or hear. Jesus touches him, sighs, and says to him, “Be opened.”

That sigh is more like a pressured groan. In its original language it is described as being like the exertion of childbirth. And the word Jesus speaks in Aramaic, ephphatha (eff-e-THA), is like the

opening of a womb with the first born. The groan of childbirth, the opening of the womb: These are images of labor. This is life-giving, transformative work.

Jesus' work transforms himself, the woman and her daughter, the man and his community, and you to new living, into a new kind of labor of love - the life-giving labor of being a follower of Christ. This new living in Christ, this life-giving labor is what James is talking about, being church: not going to church, not having a church, or joining the church, or leaving the church. James is talking about *being church*. *Churching*. If Church is the Body of Christ, then *churching* is being the Body of Christ. We are called to be the Body of Christ for the world, following the life and pattern of Christ who listens, touches, heals. These are verbs, this is action, this is a labor of love.

The "good news" that Jesus promises is that being Christ's body is not about having the right relationship with God through right thinking, right behavior, right belief, right works. You are created in goodness by God and made just, justified, in order to be Christ's body for the world. Your right relationship with God in Christ is God's gift, wholly separate from anything you do, or don't do.

The Gospel does do something *to you*, however. It leads you to a new way of being. The good news is that God perfecting love in Jesus Christ means you are free from a constant focus on perfecting yourself in order to be okay by God's standards. This frees you to spontaneously love yourself and love, care and work for your neighbor as you do for yourself.

We confess that Jesus was conceived, born, suffered, died, and rose again to release you, to free you. There is no human joy or pain that is not fully known by God.

Jesus listened to the woman who begged for healing for her daughter. Jesus listened, and was opened. The woman spoke with conviction to the one she knew could answer her need. Ask yourself: *In places where you have power, how deeply* are you listening to the needs of others, and are you open to transformation? *In places where you don't have power*, are you speaking with courage and conviction about your needs? A crowd of people brought forward one who needed healing. Jesus touched the one who was suffering. Ask yourself: *How close do you get to those who are suffering?*

Jesus heals through listening, asking, helping, and getting close to those who suffer. Our world needs this healing from Jesus. And our world needs works of love from those of us who claim Jesus as our path.

This Sunday of Labor Day Weekend, remember you are a worker in God's Beloved Community. From as close as your neighborhood or dorm, to homes and schools in Afghanistan, to clinic waiting rooms, to the flooded basements of apartments in New York City, the need is clear and great. We can't fix all of it, but as individuals and as a community we can labor with love and mercy. And as a faith community, we must wrestle with how we respond to the needs of the world: with a blessing only, or with faith and works of love that supply bodily needs, that alleviate hunger, illness, loneliness, suffering?

In the heart of the Triune God, you are enough and necessary and known and understood. You are freed to love, care and work for all the world. Christ says to you, "Be opened." Be transformed and birthed into new living. And be of good courage, for God has called you and your labor is not in vain.