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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9, James 1:17-27, Mark 7:1-15, 21-23
Doers, Not Just Hearers of the Word

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving
your own selves. (James 1:22, KJV)

If someday you should go on retreat to Saint John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, you will no doubt be going there expecting to pray. And you will pray. But also, you might well find yourself with a hoe in your hands, out there working in the garden.

I have never been to Saint John's Abbey, but I have special affection for it and would love to see it someday. My wife, Carol, has visited there, and I believe my predecessor here at Immanuel, Rev. Raymond Schulze, went on a good retreat there. And beside this, Saint John's Abbey has a world famous Manuscript Library and is home to the *Saint John's Bible*, which is the first completely handwritten and illuminated Bible to have been commissioned by a Benedictine monastery since the invention of the printing press.¹ Carol and I have small reproductions of two of the seven volumes of this beautiful calligraphy Bible.

Saint John's Abbey is a Catholic monastery. Did you know that there is a *Lutheran* monastery here in America? It is called Saint Augustine's House, in Oxford, Michigan.² Again, if you were to go there on retreat, you would probably go expecting to pray, but you might also find yourself hoeing in the garden.

That's because both Saint John's Abbey and Saint Augustine's House are Benedictine monasteries. And St. Benedict was revolutionary in his attitude toward good, old-fashioned labor. I will enjoy talking some more about St. Benedict later on in this sermon.

A LABOR DAY SERMON

This is a Labor Day sermon. It is nice the way our Bible Lessons seem to cooperate in our national holiday. Let's begin by taking a look at my opening verse at the start of this sermon. It is from our Epistle Lesson, from the First Chapter of St. James.

But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving
your own selves. (James 1:22, KJV)

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_John's_Abbey

² http://www.staugustineshouse.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=55&Itemid=79

St. James here points to an important distinction: It is one thing to *hear* the Word of God; it is something else to *do* the Word. And it is one thing to hear the holy commandments of God; it is something else, and higher, to obey them. Hearing the Word is certainly good. Indeed, that is why you good folks have roused yourself from bed on a holiday weekend and come to church. You desire to hear God's Word. There is a holy longing in your hearts for the Word of your Maker, and God bless you for that. But it is an even greater thing to match hearing with doing. Without actually obeying the commandments, the proclamation of those commandments falls short of our Lord's intention for them and for us. Pious preaching is fine. Pious living is even better.

SHYING AWAY FROM THE COMMANDMENTS

Now, you would think that if our Maker is good enough to give us commandments, that we would up and obey them. I mean, in theory our Maker could let us live like pigs, with no commandments for us. But such indifference is not compatible with our Lord's love for us. He wants us to flourish, to have life, even more abundant life, and so he gives us commandments. The Psalms are especially beautiful at expressing the idea that God's holy commandments are a gift to humanity. For example, here are a few lovely verses along these lines from Psalm 19:

⁷The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.

⁸The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes.

⁹The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring for ever: the judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.

¹⁰More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.

¹¹Moreover by them is thy servant warned: and in keeping of them there is great reward. (Psalm 19:7-11, KJV)

So, the Bible praises the holy commandments as a blessing for us. Still, we humans tend to shy away from them. Sometimes that is because of our laziness. Sometimes it is because we do not want to pay the price of such purity of price. And then, there are the high-falutin', theological-sounding reasons for disregarding the commandments.

This morning's Gospel Lesson warns us about that. Jesus has an earnest complaint against the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come down from

Jerusalem to observe him. Jesus points out about his critics that they permit their theology to set aside the very commandments of God:

⁸You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.” ⁹Then he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! ¹⁰For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’ ¹¹But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban’ (that is, an offering to God)-- ¹²then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, ¹³thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.”

Poor father and mother!

The holy commandment is clear: honor your father and mother. But it is the continual temptation of human reason to try to invent some fancy reason for disobeying the commandment. In the process, we substitute human teachings for the teachings of God.

WORK AS PRAYER

So, both Jesus and James want us to be doers of the Word and not just hearers thereof.

My next step in this Labor Day sermon is to note that often to be a doer of the *Word* means being a doer of our *jobs* in this world. It means that we are to be laborers in this world.

One of Martin Luther’s masterpieces, in my opinion, is his treatise *A Simple Way to Pray*. It is a beautiful discussion of prayer. But right in the midst of his discussion of prayer, Luther pauses to discuss our daily work:

It may well be that you may have some tasks which are as good or better than prayer, especially in an emergency. There is a saying ascribed to St. Jerome that everything a believer does is prayer¹ and a proverb, “He who works faithfully prays twice.” This can be said because a believer fears and honors God in his work and remembers the commandment not to wrong anyone, or to try to steal, defraud, or cheat. Such thoughts and such faith undoubtedly transform his work into prayer and a sacrifice of praise.³

¹ Probably Jerome’s *Commentary on Matthew*, book 4 under Matt. 25:11. *MPL* 26, 186.

³Luther, M. (1999, c1968). *Vol. 43: Luther's works, vol. 43 : Devotional Writings II* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). *Luther's Works* (43:193). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

BENEDICT (480-550), THE FATHER OF WESTERN MONASTICISM

Luther inherited this respect for daily labor from St. Benedict, who lived a thousand years before Luther. Theologian Carl Volz, now of blessed memory, was longtime professor of Church History at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. In his lovely book *The Medieval Church*, Professor Volz speaks with admiration of St. Benedict and describes the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, which has formed the basis for almost all Western monastic orders for a millennium-and-a-half now:

The *Rule* obliged the monks to three principal activities, the first being the work of God (*opus Dei*), which referred to worship held seven times a day (Psalm 119:164)... He suggested that the entire book of Psalms should be recited or sung each week, and this became the main focus of the “offices” each day: Vigils, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline⁴... A second daily obligation was that of spiritual reading (*lectio divina*), which was directed toward the spiritual growth of monks. In time its meaning was expanded to include the copying of manuscripts and general intellectual activity. The third requirement of Benedict’s monks was manual labor (*opus manuum*), which occupied from seven to eight hours daily. in the late-Roman empire such an activity was nothing short of a revolution in common attitudes, for it elevated the idea of honest labor as a virtue which in late-Roman times had been performed mainly by

⁴ **Traditional Roman Breviary.** By the end of the 5th Century the Liturgy of the Hours was composed of seven offices. Of these seven, Compline seems to have been the last to appear because the 4th-Century Apostolic Constitutions VIII iv 34 do not mention it in the exhortation "Offer up your prayers in the morning, at the third hour, the sixth, the ninth, the evening, and at cock-crowing".^[4] An eighth office, Prime, was added by Benedict of Nursia in the 6th Century. These eight are known by the following names:

- Matins (during the night, at midnight with some); also called Vigils or Nocturns or, in monastic usage, the Night Office
- Lauds or Dawn Prayer (at Dawn, or 3 a.m.)
- Prime or Early Morning Prayer (First Hour = approximately 6 a.m.)
- Terce or Mid-Morning Prayer (Third Hour = approximately 9 a.m.)
- Sext or Midday Prayer (Sixth Hour = approximately 12 noon)
- None or Mid-Afternoon Prayer (Ninth Hour = approximately 3 p.m.)
- Vespers or Evening Prayer ("at the lighting of the lamps", generally at 6 p.m.)
- Compline or Night Prayer (before retiring, generally at 9 p.m.)

Saint Benedict of Nursia (c. 480 – 543) is credited with having given this organization to the Liturgy of the Hours. However, his scheme was taken from that described by John Cassian, in his two major spiritual works, the *Institutes* and the *Conferences*, in which he described the monastic practices of the Desert Fathers of Egypt. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liturgy_of_the_Hours)

slaves. It is from these requirements that the Benedictine ideal -- pray and work (*ora et labora*) -- has been derived.⁵

DO NOT WORK TOO HARD, BUT WORK!

So, St. James, St. Benedict, and Martin Luther all want us to be workers in this world. And this leads to my final two points in this sermon: (1) We ought not to work *too* hard, but instead renew our appreciation for the Third Commandment. But (2) though we are not to work overmuch, *we are to be* workers in this world. We should be good and honest laborers.

GET SOME REST!

So, on this Labor Day weekend, one of the chief things I want to say to you is, Get some more rest! I think you have been working too hard.

This is a bit of a weakness for us Lutherans. It goes back to Martin Luther and his interpretation of the Third Commandment. That commandment requires us to remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Luther rightly points out that the heart of this commandment is that we should love God in such a manner that we take time to hear his Word. After all, how can you love anybody if you do not take time to hear the words of your beloved? So, Luther is right in his emphasis on worship as the heart of the commandment.

But for all that, the literal words of the commandment speak not of worship, but of rest:

⁸Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: ¹⁰But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: ¹¹For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it. (Genesis 20:8-11, KJV)

I figure that our Maker, who designed our human bodies, knows very well what we need. And if he requires us to get regular rest, we would do well to obey.

BUT DO BE WORKERS IN THIS WORLD

So, that's the first point: Do not work *too* hard. But the second point is that, nonetheless, we ought to be workers in this world. If we are lazy, it is a sin worth

⁵ Carl A. Volz, *The Medieval Church* (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1997), pages 16-17.

confessing each Sunday when we kneel at the start of the liturgy, and it is a sin worth trying to overcome.

Both before and after the Fall, humans were meant to be workers. And so, before the Fall, fresh from God's hand, we were given our appointed work in this world. We were to tend the Garden. Not destroy the Garden, nor to neglect it, nor to exploit it, but to take good care of it:

¹⁵And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it. (Genesis 2:15, KJV)

After the Fall, it remains the will of our Maker that we should be people of work. Good habits can help transform labor into vocation, so that the work is not quite so toilsome. But there is no guarantee that our work will be easy, even with good habits. It is part of our fall, that we must labor for our daily bread by the sweat of our brows:

¹⁷And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; ¹⁸Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; ¹⁹In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return. (Genesis 3:17-19, KJV)

LABOR FOR DAILY BREAD TOO

In a recent Gospel Lesson, Jesus urged us to labor for the bread of eternal life:

²⁷Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of man will give to you; for on him has God the Father set his seal.” (John 6:27, RSV)

But in saying this, Jesus did not mean that we should stop laboring for our earthly bread. We are not to be idle people in this world. St. Paul warns the Thessalonians about idleness:

⁶Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. ⁷For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, ⁸and we did not

eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. ⁹This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. ¹⁰For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. ¹¹For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. ¹²Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. ¹³Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right. (2 Thessalonians 3:6-13, NRSV)

Finally, St. Paul reveals a good reason for being honest workers in this world. It is not simply that we not bring scandal to the name of Jesus, but also that we can make some money to give to others:

²⁸Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his hands, *so that he may be able to give to those in need.* (Ephesians 4:28, RSV)

This is why Luther connects prayer and work. This is why he endorses the old saying, "He who works faithfully prays twice." We ought not to work overmuch, so that we neglect even the Sabbath day, but we should work honestly and faithfully, that we can love our neighbors in the good, old-fashioned way of producing good quality work and by sharing some of our wages with those in need, rendering service to them in the name of our Lord Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.