

OUTREACH, SERMONS

SERMON, SUNDAY, SEPT. 6

SEPTEMBER 6, 2015 MIRANDA HASSETT

This Sunday's Bible readings [may be found here](#).

Happy Lammas!

What is Lammastide? No, it doesn't have anything to do with those funny long-necked animals you sometimes see hanging out with the sheep or goats in a field by the side of the road...

Lammas is an ancient harvest festival that became a church festival in our mother church, the Church of England. The word means "loaf mass." It was originally held at the time of year when the first grain ripened enough to be made into fresh loaves of bread, at the end of the summer.

At Lammastide, the people of God offer the first fruits of the growing season to God with thanks for the harvest. It's a practice grounded in the Hebrew Bible, and followed in various forms by peoples around the world who name the Divine in many different ways. When the harvest comes in, you give some of it back to God. You don't take it for granted. Nature is uncertain. Life is uncertain. But here we all are again. Thanks be to God.

When you start poking around the Bible to see what it says about bread, you run pretty quickly into the connection between bread and justice – by way of the obvious connection between bread and hunger. Just as surely and persistently as Scripture calls God's people to offer bread to God, as a sign of thanksgiving; so just as surely and persistently does Scripture call God's people to share bread with the hungry. Our lesson from Proverbs today puts it plainly: Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor.

In fact, there's a strain of thought in the Hebrew Bible that giving to others is actually another way to give to God, in addition to making offerings at the Temple. Maybe even a better way. That idea appears both the books of the Law, laying out God's ways for God's people, and in the Prophetic books, in which the prophets call God's people back to those ways. It's even in the Psalms – In Psalm 50, God asks, Do you think I eat the food you offer? If I were hungry, I

have all Creation with which to feed myself. Make your offering to me by living justly.

And then there's James, with his rather pointed counsel to treat people fairly, and never to dishonor or persecute the poor. It's hard to imagine a more fitting text for Labor Day Weekend, if we hold in mind the origin and intentions of that holiday. Beyond the school supply sales, beyond the last weekend for summer travel, Labor Day began as a holiday to honor the historic achievements of the Labor movement in its heyday, in advocating for and protecting working people and especially the working poor. Like pushing for the Fair Labor Standards Act, which established a limited work week with time for rest and leisure; for minimum wage and overtime laws; for the Occupational Safety and Health Act, better known as OSHA, which holds employers responsible for their workers' safety; for helping to establish employer-based health insurance; pushing for the Family and Medical Leave Act, which protects your job if you have to take time off for a medical or family situation; and helping to end child labor.

People of good faith hold varying views on the labor movement today, but I am very glad to live in a country in which these policies and protections for working people are the law the land, and I'm grateful to those who worked and fought to make them so.

The Bible didn't envision a democratic society, in which the people can organize to shape the laws that govern their lives. But those who have done that work, in our nation and others, have plenty of Scriptures they can quote – including the letter of James. Jerry Folk, a Lutheran pastor and scholar who teaches at Edgewood College, has this to say about the witness of James:

“James and many other biblical authors believe that all workers have a God-given right to a just wage, safe and humane working conditions, and time for life with their families and friends; [and] that they have a God-given right to a life of dignity with some measure of comfort and security.”

My first thought on reading that sentence was, Wow, that's pretty radical; surely he's putting words in the Bible's mouth. Then I started thinking about and looking up all the passages in the Bible – especially in the Torah, in the Prophets, the Gospels and, yes, James – that deal with justice, work, rest, human wellbeing, and with the obligations of the wealthy, and of the community as a whole, towards the poor.

And I realized, Nope, Professor Folk is not stretching a point. The Bible, our sacred text, really says that workers should be paid fairly, enough that they don't go hungry and can care for their families; that work should not become bondage; that workers should have dignity; that everyone is entitled to time for rest; and that those unable to work should be cared for by the community. That is the Bible's witness about God's intentions for human society and economy.

James seems to be addressing these matters in a situation in which some Christian communities are treating the rich and the poor differently. There's an ancient tradition that James may actually be the brother of Jesus – and, honestly, it could be true. There's a lot here that sounds close to Jesus' own teachings.

James warns those who are trying to follow Jesus that they must not shame the poor or treat them as less important than the wealthy. He reminds them that God sides with the poor, when the interests of the rich and the poor are at odds:

“Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? Yet you have dishonored the poor... If you show favoritism in this way, you commit sin.” His words echo the Book of Proverbs: “The LORD pleads the cause [of the poor] and will take from those who take from the poor.”

And James offers these words, which challenge and convict me every time (2:14 – 17):

“What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not live out that faith in action? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not respond to their needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, not shown in action, is dead.”

In last week's lesson, the first chapter of James, he writes, “Be doers of the Word of God, not just hearers.”

What good is your faith if you don't live it out in action? What's the use of your good wishes for those who don't have enough, those who live with want and worry as constant companions, if you don't act to improve their circumstances? Those are questions that haunt my days, my years. It puts me mind of a famous quotation from C.S. Lewis that makes the rounds of the Internet from time to

time: “If you want a religion to make you really comfortable, I certainly don’t recommend Christianity...”

We live in a time of massive and increasing economic inequality in America. By some measures, our country has the greatest income inequality in the developed world. And when we look at wealth instead of income, the disparities are even greater. [An article in Scientific American earlier this year](#) reported that the top 20% of US households own more than 84% of the wealth of our country, and the bottom 40% of households own just 0.3%.

To some extent, we Americans tolerate this stark inequality because we believe that anyone who works hard can make good. And some do, of course. But we sharply underestimate the barriers and overestimate our society’s capacity for social and economic mobility. Mobility is measurable, just like income and wealth, and America has less, not more, social mobility than other developed nations.

That’s a really brief snapshot of a huge, messy issue. Google “economic inequality America” to learn more than you want to know.

Massive and increasing economic inequality in America is a fact. How to understand it, and solve it, are issues on which smart and good-hearted people can hold differing views. One way or another, it is already one of the central themes of the year’s political debates.

But while the answers are complex, I believe the question for people of faith is pretty simple: How do we live as God’s people in the face of these realities? In the face of a social and economic order that is, from God’s point of view, disordered?

If indeed we accept the Bible as our witness to God’s plans and purposes for humanity, then we have to face the fact that God has told us again and again that the wellbeing of the poor matters. That having people in grinding poverty, hungry, struggling, vulnerable, hopeless, is NOT OK WITH GOD. And we have to come back to James’s words, those words that cling like a burr: what good is your faith if you’re not acting on it?

Just as surely and persistently as Scripture calls God’s people to offer bread to God as a sign of thanksgiving; so just as surely and persistently does Scripture call God’s people to share bread with the hungry.

Our parish is already generous with our charity. But the scope of inequality and need in our nation is such that charity isn't going to solve it. I'm pretty sure those in our congregation who are most deeply involved with the charitable ministries of our city, like MOM and IHN, would agree. Charity can feed a family for a day or week, but most of the time it can't prevent the hungry days from rolling around again.

The Biblical call to sharing and generosity is about more than charity. It's about how we order our common life. Consider an example from the Old Testament, from Leviticus, the Book of the Law of God that tells God's people the Jews how to live in God's ways of holiness, mercy and justice. One of the laws of Leviticus is the law of gleaning – an appropriate topic for a harvest festival.

In a nutshell, gleaning means that landowners – the wealthy elite, in that context – weren't supposed to take everything when they harvested their fields, orchards and vineyards. They were supposed to leave the edges and corners unharvested. Then those without land or work could come and gather from those edges and corners, to feed their families.

[The Theology of Work Commentary](#) says, "We might [see] gleaning as an expression of compassion..., but according to Leviticus, allowing others to glean... is the fruit of holiness. We do it because God says, "I am the Lord your God" ([Lev. 19:10](#)). This highlights the distinction between charity and gleaning. In charity, people voluntarily give to others who are in need. This is a good and noble thing to do, but it is not what Leviticus is talking about. Gleaning is a process in which landowners have an *obligation* to provide poor and marginalized people access to the means of production... and to work it *themselves*. Unlike charity, it does not depend on the generosity of landowners. In this sense, it was much more like a tax than a charitable contribution. Also unlike charity, it was not *given* to the poor... Through gleaning, the poor earned their living the same way as the landowners did, by working the fields with their own labors. It was simply a command that everyone had a right to access the means of provision created by God."

The Commentary goes on to note, as I have, that our Biblical models don't provide easy solutions for our circumstances: "Certainly Leviticus does not contain a system ready-made for today's economies." There aren't straightforward answers in Scripture to today's socioeconomic dilemmas, and I won't pretend that there are.

The people of the Bible didn't live in a democracy, so we have to do our own work discerning how to participate in civic life as people of faith, and what it looks like to work towards God's justice in a secular society.

The people of the Bible didn't live with advanced capitalism. Exploitation of the poor by the rich was a clear and unvarnished reality in those times and places. It's messier now, with questions about how a business's profits relate to the wellbeing of its employees, or which poor people we should prioritize in a global economy, and many other complexities and ambiguities.

The people of the Bible lived in a world of rich and poor, starkly defined. Most of us here are more or less middle-class. We know that we are privileged, rich by global standards. But we also don't feel wealthy or powerful enough to make much difference in the status quo. When the Bible talks about rich and poor, we often don't know where to find ourselves in those stories and teachings.

In the face of all those questions and uncertainties, here is what we can hold onto, as concrete and crusty as a loaf of good bread. What we do with what we have, matters. What is ours, isn't really ours in an absolute sense. Whether we were born into it or worked hard for it or a little of both, it comes to us as a resource for our own flourishing, yes, but also for the flourishing of others, and of the whole cosmos. (Did you know that word, cosmos, which means the system, the great big encompassing dynamic whole, that's the word that's translated "world" in the New Testament? As in, God sent his Son into the system, not to condemn the system, but that through Him the system might be saved?... That's a whole nother sermon.)

I'm not just talking money here; we have all kinds of assets, resources, privileges. For example, I suspect that I am comparatively more wealthy in education and institutional position than I am in financial resources. That means that when I'm passionate about something, I may be able to advance it further by committing time and skill than by committing money. You know what your resources, your assets are.

What we do with what we have is one of the themes of our fall season. It's not a liturgical season, though if it were I suppose green would be the appropriate color! But it's the season of harvest, so deep deep in the rhythms of the year, it's a time when we think about bounty, about offering, thanking, giving, sharing. It's a season when the winter's hardships loom, so our hearts and minds turn to the needs of those who may go hungry and cold in the months ahead. It's the final

quarter of the fiscal year and time to plan for the next one, so organizations and institutions are soliciting commitments and setting budgets.

In October we'll have three weeks in a row with invitations to engage with the needs of the wider community – Backpack Snack Packs, Bread for the World's Offering of Letters, and CROP Walk – we're calling it the Hunger Weeks. And of course, right after that, we'll kick off our parish pledge drive, our shared conversation about your choices to use some of your resources to support this church, and about how this church should use its resource to support God's mission.

What we do with what we have, matters. We often don't know how best to use our resources to forward God's dream of an economy of human dignity and wellbeing. But maybe that's one of the things that church is for.

Maybe it's through our common prayer, through reading and talking about Scripture together, through shared learning and service, and through our conversations with one another – the kind where we see things the same way but push each other to go deeper, and the kind where we see things differently but discover our underlying shared hopes and fears – Maybe it's through all that, the substance of our life together as a community of faith, that we'll find the way to be doers of the Word of God, and not just hearers.

<https://stdunstans.com/2015/09/sermon-sunday-sept-6/>