Eternal God, pour out your Spirit upon us, that we might be sensitive to your presence, attentive to your Word, and faithful always to your way. Through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

On this Labor Sunday I want to speak about how we as people of faith labor or work in this world. The history of Labor Day is one that is a bit clouded in places. We are uncertain who first conceived of the idea of a Labor Day. There are some records that indicate that there was a man by the name of Peter J. McGuire, who was the General Secretary of the Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners. He proposed a day that would honor “all those who from rude nature carve the beauty we behold.” In other words, he wanted a day to honor carpenters.

There is another tradition that says there was a man by the name of Michael Maguire (sounds the same, spelled differently), who was a machinist. He thought there ought to be a day celebrating all machinists.

You see what happens? We usually think about our group. We certainly think out of our perspective. What we do know about the history of the celebration of this day is that in 1882, the first Labor Day celebration took place in New York City. Five years later, in 1887, Oregon was the first state to make an official holiday, and called it Labor Day. Several years after that in 1894, after twenty-three states had established a legal Labor Day, Congress passed a national Labor Day.

The early celebrations of Labor Day are much like we know today. There was a parade, usually trade groups or labor unions, so that people could represent their solidarity and show their esprit de corps. There were also “festivals of recreation and amusement for the workers and their families.” In other words, they had a parade and a picnic. Sounds pretty all-American, doesn’t it?

Today most of us see Labor Day as the last holiday of summer. It is the last long weekend for vacation away from work, rather than a time to celebrate work. Also, there are those who use this occasion to bring to our attention such issues as living wage, or worker’s conditions, or benefits, or lack thereof, or other justice issues that surround the whole topic of labor.
When we think of labor today, oftentimes people think of laboring too much, having too much to do. The topic of “burn-out” comes up. The theologian Will Willimon says that burn-out isn’t always caused by unrelenting work. Sometimes it is caused by lack of industry. We feel burned-out at our job because we don’t really put ourselves into it, so the job seems overwhelming, or it is not the right kind of job for who we are. Susan Littwin in her book, The Postponed Generation, talks about working-age people today. She says many of these people were brought up never expecting to really work hard, or sacrifice, or delay gratification. They want what their parents acquired slowly, but they don’t want to wait, to work, or worry. Our attitude about work is a problem that we face in our culture today.

Christopher Lasch in his book, The Culture of Narcissism, says that we live in a consumer society. Consumerism dominates who we are. It gives us our identity. One of the ways we value each other and ourselves is in how many things we have. The problem he says is things don’t nurture the spirit. We spend more and more time working to get things that leave us empty. Our time is full of work, but our souls are empty.

These are issues that surround our understanding of labor and work today. The two passages of scripture speak about work as well. Both James and Jesus speak about the nature of our labor and how it is that we are to work.

James sets the context by first of all giving us an image of God. God is generous. God’s work blesses us. God is constant. James makes these points by the image “God is the Father of lights,” the Creator of lights, the One who brings light into the world. In God there is no shadow of change. This God who generously and graciously blesses us with light and puts light within us, does not change. God is generous and constant.

Then James calls us to be the first fruits of God, to take the word that God has implanted in us (an agriculture image) and to allow it to grow and bear fruit. The fruit that we are to bear is the fruit of righteousness, of right relationships, of living appropriately with each other. James says, don’t look in a mirror to see what you look like, look into the words of God to see what you can be like.

Notice words are very important to James. Words were very important to all ancient peoples. They believed they were efficacious, that they had power. Words were as powerful as actions because they could bring about desired results. That is why in the Old Testament, in the story about Isaac blessing his sons, we have the incident were Isaac inadvertently blesses Jacob, but he can’t pull the words back. He can’t take the blessing away because the action has already been done. The blessing has taken place in the saying of the words. Even though Isaac meant to bless Esau, it’s not to happen. Words are efficacious. It is why in the 12th chapter of Matthew Jesus says, “I tell you, on the day of judgment you will be held accountable for every careless word you have spoken.” That’s a little scary isn’t it, every careless word we have spoken. He says we will be justified by our words and we will be condemned by our words. The good words we speak justify us. The bad words condemn us. Why is that? The reason is, words have power.

James also speaks of the heart. He says it is out of the heart that all this comes. The heart is not the center of emotion like you and I understand. The heart for the ancient peoples is what we would call the soul. It is their true being, their inner being. If God has implanted God’s word in us, then that is what is in our soul, that’s what is in our heart. When we labor, we labor from the heart. We labor from the word of God within us. We labor to reflect light into the world and to do it as constantly as we possibly can, thus modeling the image that God has given to us. In God’s labor so also are we to labor.

We hear James also say, “Don’t be just hearers of the word, but doers also.” James is very careful in the order of the way he says things. Listen to his order: “Be quick to listen, and slow to speak. Don’t be just hearers of the word, but doers also.” That’s the sequence we are to follow. That’s the model for our lives of work. We are to listen for God’s word, and then we are to speak and act according to God’s word, to the light that God has given to us.

Just to make sure we get it, at the end of the passage James says, “This is religion pure and undefiled, that you take care of the orphans and widows in your midst, and you remain unstained by the world.” He wants us to be sure we know what we are supposed to do. We are to care for everyone. We are to share God’s grace with everyone, especially those who have been wounded and cut off from the rest of society. In so doing, we are unstained by the
You and I know the power of words, don’t we? We know the life-giving power of some words. Hear these phrases: “I love you.” That’s a phrase that gives life. “I have a job.” For a parent, if their child is saying that, that’s a phrase that really gives life. “The baby is okay.” That is the promise of new life. “The biopsy was negative.” That’s the promise of life ongoing. Words have power. We can give life to each other by what we say as well as what we do. But we can take life away as well. We take life away when we say, “I hate you.” We take life away when we say, “You never do it right.” We take life away when we say, “I don’t want to see you anymore.” There are so many ways that we can give life and take it away. Our words have power, and the calling of the Christian faith is that we labor from the heart; we speak and act from the word of God within us, and share God’s grace that has been given to us.

Jesus, in the passage from Matthew, finds himself in one of those difficult situations of life. His disciples have decided to eat, but they either didn’t take the time or didn’t have the inclination to wash their hands. It was a terrible thing. (Every mother knows that this is not to be done.) The Pharisees were a group of people that lived by ritual. They performed ceremonial hand washings. Remember the story of the wedding in Cana, and all of the water pots that were lined up? The water pots were for ceremonial washing. Hundreds of gallons were available for people to wash their hands. When the Pharisees washed their hands for these ceremonies, they used gallons upon gallons of water to do it.

Jesus is speaking to three groups of people: the Pharisees, his disciples, and the crowd. He says the same thing to each one, using different words so they will understand. Essentially what he says is, “It’s not what goes into you that defiles you, it’s what comes out of you that defiles you.” He is talking about our words and our actions. Our words and our actions are what defile us. Or we might say, they are what define us. Our words and our actions define our lives.

It was forty years ago last Thursday that the march on Washington, D.C. occurred, and Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his “I Have a Dream,” speech. Maybe you have listened to the radio, or watched TV, or read the newspaper this week, and saw some of the summaries and the remembrances of that march.

There was a young boy, twelve years of age, living in Jackson, Mississippi, by the name of Gene Young. He told his parents he wanted to go to Washington, D.C. Reluctantly they allowed him to get on a bus, at the age of twelve, to go to the march. He is now a retired professor of education. He says he remembers standing in line to get on the bus. He was about two people back in line when his mama came running up to him. She had sandwiches and fried fish for everybody on the bus. Sounds like a typical southern mama, doesn’t it? Feed those boys. He said an amazing thing happened when he got to Washington. He was overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of people, black and white together, people who spoke and acted in love and equality. The thing that amazed him most was that all the men were wearing suits and ties. They weren’t going to a picnic. This was serious for them. This was life giving for them. This was a formal, important occasion for them.

At the time of the march, Lee White was the Assistant Counsel to President Kennedy. He said that the administration and the Congress and the press were all fearful that a great riot would erupt from this march. However, when the march was over they realized what had happened, that the people who were gathered in Washington were people who spoke and acted in the same way. They labored from their hearts. Their words and their actions came out of the word of God in them.

Jim Jackson is a member of our congregation. He is also the president of the San Diego Rescue Mission. He was speaking to several of us this week. As you may or may not know, a judgment has been placed on the Rescue Mission keeping them from moving into their new facility. The judgment is assessed against the Mission because of an error committed by the city. (Now you figure that one out. I don’t understand that kind of reasoning.) Jim said that when he sat down with his board they had to decide what they were going to do in court. Clearly and quickly they decided they had to act in a way that was consistent with what they preached and taught to their clients. In other words, their words and their actions had to come from the heart. He said he knows it will cost them an immense amount of money. It is going to cost them some of their client services for the time being, but he is confident in the
long run that it will free them to be more effective in working with the poor, and it will provide freedom for other organizations to work with the poor too. I pray that is so, because we need people like Jim in groups like the Rescue Mission, people who speak and labor from the heart.

Charles McCarry was an author of several books, and the Assistant Secretary of Labor, as well as holding some other important positions in our government. He is a man of many talents, a man who used those talents in many different ways in the service of other people. But he was also a man who was almost not born. His mother was thirty-nine when she became pregnant with him. He had one other sibling, but when that child was born it was very dangerous for the mother, and the doctor said at that time, “You can never have another child.” She became pregnant again. The doctor said, “No way can you have this child. It will take your life. I recommend you have an abortion.” She did not follow her doctor’s recommendation, and Charles McCarry was born. He said that right before his mother died, at the age of ninety-seven, he asked her, “Why did you go against your doctor’s instructions?” She said, “Because I wanted to see who you would turn out to be.”

Who we turn out to be is defined by our words and actions. “Be quick to listen to the word of God, then speak and act that word.” Labor from the heart. Thanks be to God.