

A SERMON PREACHED ON SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 2, 2018,

AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE

The summer days were waning when the gorilla walked into an ice cream parlor, and placing a \$20 bill on the counter, ordered a banana split. The attendant was quite surprised but went ahead with the preparations. When it came time to pay he thought to himself, "Hey, gorillas don't know much about money," so he gave him the banana split and a \$1 change. The gorilla was very quiet as he slowly savored his banana split. The attendant, wishing to make conversation, cleaned off the counter with a towel and said "you know we don't get many gorillas in here." "No wonder," the gorilla chimed in "at \$19 a banana split!" Here we are once again at the end of the official summer season at Bethany Beach. Tomorrow the majority of the vacationers will abandon their summer posts and head back to home and to school. Although a few will stay behind and a few will still arrive for those post summer vacay days (which, I may add, are always the best), the stay at the shore for 2018 is now over. With it brings many good memories of days at the beach and at those ever-tantalizing outlets, nights at the boardwalk and trips to Boinky's for ice cream, sandcastles and treacherous holes that have been dug by bored children and their parents who are determined to keep them out of the water. We've been given this National Holiday called Labor Day thanks to President Grover Cleveland, who signed it into law in 1894, although the holiday had already been celebrated in some cities and states during the previous decade. It was the first "workingman's" holiday.

According to Brian J.O'Connell of *The Street*, as the 1800's drew to a close, U.S. labor organizations like the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Central Labor Union were having trouble gathering members. While there was a growing network of smaller unions appearing on the U.S. landscape, they weren't unified, and really had no way to do so.

Into the breach stepped the larger unions based in New York City, who came up with a brilliant idea: gather as many of the smaller unions in one place at one time, and work to band them together for the common good of the American worker. The mechanism for doing so: The first Labor Day parade on 42nd Street in Manhattan. When workers arrived in New York and met with labor leaders and other workers, they found all had several big issues in common - longer working hours (often 60 hours-per-week), low wages, and unsafe working conditions, among other issues. Soon after, the U.S. labor movement took wing and began fighting hard for benefits that many current workers often take for granted now, over 130 years later.ⁱ And so, the next time we're at the beach on Labor Day, as we're often told, let us remember these men and women who fought for the rights to celebrate this day and to bring fair and humane laws to the labor market.

Would that this was all there was to remember about today it would certainly be enough. We return now to the biblical lessons of *The Gospel of Mark* after six weeks of dealing with the "I am The Bread of Life" portions in *John*. Following the story of the multiplication of the loaves, Mark looks intently about how it is that Christians eat and the biblical laws surrounding cleanliness and what can be consumed. It is the Pharisees who approach him this time. They saw some of Jesus' disciples eating food without having properly washed their hands (it was a ceremonial washing anyway, not a thorough scrubbing that would have prevented a disease, for example.) So they ask Jesus why his disciples don't live in the tradition of the elders instead of eating food with their defiled hands? Jesus gives the Pharisees "a talking to," as my grandmother used to say. He knows that this question is not an innocent one, and is meant to indict Jesus. Asking why some of his followers do not live according to the law has the intent of accusing Jesus of disobeying the law himself, and of claiming to be above the law. With this in mind, he rebukes the Pharisees by quoting *Isaiah*; in fact he goes so far as to call them "hypocrites" because they abandon the commandment of God and hold on to the human condition. We've heard these words before. They were spoken by preachers across the nation with regard to the immigration crisis and the separation of children from their parents when Sarah Huckabee Sanders stated that the law of the U.S. government is greater than the laws of God. That debate continues yet today. What is at stake, of course, is the state of the heart. Jesus gathers those around him once again to try to explain that it is not what you eat or take into yourself that renders you impure, but really the things that come out that defile. That is why our hearts must be pure, our souls open to wisdom, our minds open to new ways of thinking. Otherwise, the kingdom of heaven, the beloved community of God, can never break through.

Of course the disciples do not get it, so Jesus tries to give some specifics. He proclaims that sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly - - all these evils - - come from inside and defile a person." And he states what he believes, that if we spent more time concerned about these portions of the law rather than what we eat or how we wash dishes we and the world would be much better off. (One could spend a whole sermon on any of these topics; indeed, Reformation and Victorian preachers did just that. I will spare us that torture this morning, but I warn you it can be had on the Internet or by just walking down the street a bit.) A sort of counterbalance is reached through the second lesson for today that hails from the *Epistle of James* which tells us that every good and perfect gift is from above. He then tells us to be quick to listen and slow to anger. Next on his list is to not only listen to the word, but to do what it says. And finally those who say they are religious but can't keep a tight rein on their tongues (in a gossipy kind of way) - - well their religion is worthless. What we should be about is helping widows and orphans (presumably the poorer amongst us) and to keep ourselves from being polluted by the world in the kind of ways found on Jesus' list.

None of what we learn or hear in this passage from James is of great consequence or major thinking (though some of his portions like “be doers only and not merely hearers” are quite well known.) Yet it seems that like in the portion from *Mark* we read earlier we are supposed to get some great lesson about how we are to live our lives. The question I have is why God might be concerned about it. (Billy Graham preached that God is concerned about every detail of our lives...) Is it because God is a parent and this is what parents do? Is God afraid we’ll make a mess of things (if we have not done so already)? How does God return to us and let us know that the mistakes we have made have been forgiven, by others, by God, by our own Spirit? Just how are we supposed to live our lives? Are we not doing things correctly as yet? Do we all have a mission and if so, how do we discover what our personal goals are to be?

While I may be competent in asking the question, I am less confident providing an answer. It reminds me of a story about a pastor who was giving the children’s message during church. For this part of the service, he would gather all the children around him and give a brief lesson before dismissing them for children’s church. On this particular Sunday, he was using squirrels for an object lesson on industry and preparation. He started out by saying, “I’m going to describe something, and I want you to raise your hand when you know what it is.” The children nodded eagerly. “This thing lives in trees (pause) and eats nuts (pause)...” No hands went up. “And it is gray (pause) and has a long bushy tail (pause)...” The children were looking at each other, but still no hands raised. “And it jumps from branch to branch (pause) and chatters and flips its tail when it’s excited (pause)...” Finally one little boy tentatively raised his hand. The pastor breathed a sigh of relief and called on him. “Well...,” said the boy, “I know the answer must be Jesus...but it sure sounds like a squirrel!”ⁱⁱ Just like the young boy, we’ll be tempted to answer “Jesus” every time we discuss our religious personal goals, though we know that the answer is much more complicated and deeper than merely stating or calling upon his name. It’s more complicated than prayer. It’s more complicated than taking communion on Sundays.

I’m up for a list. Here is a short list of four ways to be create/open up a relationship with God and God’s people and to discover and live out your personal goals:

What were some challenges, difficulties and hardships you’ve recently overcome or are in the process of overcoming? How did you do it?

What causes do you strongly believe in? Connect with?

If you could get a message across to a large group of people, who would those people be?

What would your message be?

Given your talents, passions and values, how could you use these resources to serve, to help, to contribute? (to people, beings, causes, organizations, environment, the planet, etc.).ⁱⁱⁱ

Now, these may seem somewhat secular, but they all work in a religious context. Take the time and try one of the exercises today. They will make a difference!

We also like spiritual guides to take us on our way. Here is another list, this time of books, that seems to speak directly to the soul – life-changing books that stay with you long after you’ve finished reading them.

1. *The Alchemist* – Paul Coelho: an Andalusian shepherd boy yearns to travel in search of a worldly treasure. But his quest takes him in a different - and far more satisfying - direction, to learn how to listen to his heart and follow his dreams.
2. *The Artist’s Way*- Julia Cameron: Essentially a self-help workbook on creativity, this book coaxes readers along a spiritual, artistic path. With tasks to complete at the end of each chapter, reading this book is a dynamic affair.
3. *Life of Pi*: Jann Martel: Pi Patel is the son of a zookeeper, with an encyclopedic knowledge of animals and a taste for philosophy. While immigrating to North America from India with his family, their ship sinks - and Pi finds himself alone in a lifeboat with a hyena, an orangutan, a wounded zebra, and Richard Parker, a 450-pound Bengal tiger - or does he?
4. *The Road Less Travelled*: M.Scott Peck: With an eloquent examination of complex, human concepts such as discipline and love, Peck theorizes four distinct stages of human spiritual development along the path to self-realization.
5. *The History of Love*: Nicole Kraus: This beautiful book-within-a-book tells the story of Leo Gursky and the love of his life, Alma. With an adventure across oceans and decades, the novel is fueled by the thrill of mystery and joy of connection.
6. *Conversations with God*: Neil Donald Walsch: The entire series is a captivating back and forth conversation between the author and ‘God’ - on topics ranging from religion and spirituality to education, love and politics.

7. *The Giving Tree*: Shel Silverstein: a beautiful, poignant story of a tree who loved a little boy. The tree loves the boy and does anything she can for him as he grows older - without regard for what she's getting in return.
8. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*: Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi: This classic work on happiness touches on contemporary psychology, delving into issues such as family, art and sport to ultimately answer the question - how do we make our lives meaningful?
9. *Sophie's World*: Jostein Gaarder: A novel and a philosophical work in one, this book tells the story of Sophie Amundsen, a teenage girl living in Norway, and Alberto Knox, the middle-aged philosopher who introduces her to philosophy.
10. *The Red Tent*: Anita Diamant : This novel imagines the compelling story of the biblical Dinah - daughter of Leah and Jacob and sister of Joseph. Building on hints in the *Book of Genesis*, the author writes about the lives of women in biblical times, touching on mothers and daughters, midwifery, love, and living in a foreign land.^{iv}

So there you have it; two good lists, an exposition of the *Gospel of Mark* and the *Epistle of James*, and a brief history of Labor Day in America. You might say it was a varied lecture with some homework for you all. If nothing else, you've got a book list of great tomes and texts to get you through to Memorial Day, when it all begins once again.

Amen.

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ⁱ<https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/money/the-history-of-labor-day-and-what-it-means-today/ar-BBMbkZj>

ⁱⁱ <https://stickwithjesus.wordpress.com/2017/01/27/it-sounds-like-a-squirrel/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://thinksimplenow.com/happiness/life-on-purpose-15-questions-to-discover-your-personal-mission>

^{iv} <https://www.goodnet.org/articles/10-lifechanging-books-that-will-stay-you-forever>