

## Faith Fortified

In some ways, the song we just got done hearing (40 Hour Week by Alabama) is hopelessly out of date. Released just thirty-six years ago in 1985, it gives thanks for all kinds of blue-collar jobs which no longer employ as many as they once did. Today, Detroit is no longer synonymous with automaking. Pittsburgh is no longer filled with steel workers. Today there are fewer coal miners in West Virginia than there once were. Today the family farm can no longer compete with the corporate farm or the multinational farm. Today the advancing tide of driverless vehicles does not bode well for those in the transportation industry. Fact is we're no longer the industrial economy we once were. For the educated and the uneducated jobs are tougher and tougher to find and to hold; particularly jobs which will support a middle-class lifestyle. And all of this was already starting to happen when Alabama released its song in 1985. The notes of protest in the song aren't hard to hear. Industrial America, blue-collar America, had a spirit you can't replace with no machine the song says at one point. There's something lost, this song says, when the common good doesn't include each of us and when we don't each support the common good with our love and our labor. But what is it that's lost? With so much now different than it once was, what is it we are now seeking to recapture?

In the simplest language possible, I'd call it the Christian ethic or the Christian spirit. Christians are big, very big, on the value and the dignity of each human life. We insist that everyone has gifts which can enhance our common life together and that our common life together shall suffer when the gifts we all have aren't cultivated and utilized in affirming and respectful ways. It's a take on things that goes all the way back to the first chapter of the Bible where we're told that every human being has been created in the image of God. And this conviction that we're all valuable, all capable of helping the sum become greater than its parts, also shows up in today's appointed readings from Scripture.

To start with our gospel, why is Jesus the Good Shepherd? Because he sacrifices himself for the sheep; laying down his life to keep the flock alive and in circulation. Jesus, through the cross, recognizes that the shepherd is not more important than the sheep; that the common good suffers when we don't stand in the way of wolves that threaten to gobble up some or all of the flock. The Good Shepherd is the Good Shepherd because he lays down his life out of the recognition that the sum can only be greater than its parts when all of the parts are around to support it. It's a very Christian take on things that also informs our reading from 1<sup>st</sup> John.

To echo what's said in verse seventeen, is it good or bad if someone with the world's goods, someone with earthly means, ignores those in need? According to our reading from 1<sup>st</sup> John, it's bad; one hundred and one percent bad; a complete departure from the Christian way bad. When we're true to our identity as Christians, we love as Christ loved. And how did Christ love? He laid down his life for the sheep. He sacrificed himself for the greater good. He died for you and for me because we're important; because the common good suffers when we're not around to support it in a way that also supports us. Do you hear how St. John was writing the lyrics to "40 Hour Week" long before Alabama first sang them in the mid-eighties. We Christians are big, very big, on the value and the dignity of every life and gift. Systems that exclude, systems with super-sized winners and super-sized losers, are not good systems as far as we're concerned. We've all got gifts which can support the common good and which the common good itself should support. And this brings us to our reading from Acts.

Today's reading from Acts is a continuation of last week's reading from the same book. Last week Peter explained to a dumbstruck crowd that the healing of a cripple had put the wonder of Easter on full display; proving the tomb was empty and that Jesus was the King of kings and Lord of lords. In between that sermon and another one like it today, Peter and John are arrested by the priestly establishment; setting up today's additional opportunity to bear witness. There are definitely some points of continuity between this week's reading and last week's reading from Acts, but here's the thing we don't want to miss. Jesus is healing outside of the priestly establishment. Jesus is healing through blue-collar fishermen from remote and rural Galilee. To put a more contemporary spin on it, Jesus is healing through the Detroit autoworker; through the Pittsburgh steelworker; through the West Virginia coalminer; through the Kansas wheat farmer; through the truck driver employed by Young American Furniture or W.C. McQuaide or Hard Hat Trucking here in Johnstown. Maybe it's because the priestly establishment has gotten too big for its britches; making its contributions more important than those of everybody else. Maybe it's just to affirm that we all contribute to the Kingdom of God in ways as important as they are various and numerous. But one way or another we arrive back at the Christian ethic or Christian spirit our society is perhaps in danger of losing today. With Jesus healing through fishermen, we're told we're all important; that none of us are throwaway stuff. For all of today's readings, we win when we all win and keep making the sacrifices, keep carrying the crosses, that enable this to happen. All for one and one for all are we supposed to be. And this too is reflected in Scripture and in Alabama's song from 1985.

Up to now, I've talked primarily about the value and the dignity of each person; of how God creates all of us to make a profound and incredible difference. But this also can be overdone. In Alabama's song, the Detroit autoworker, the Pittsburgh steelworker, the West Virginia coalminer, the Kansas wheat farmer, the Johnstown truck driver are not ends in themselves, but spokes in a larger wheel. They all work to send it on down the line so the next person might make their own vital and individual contribution to the common good. While the value of every person is affirmed and never surrendered, supporting the wheel, keeping we and me in balance, is always part of the equation too. It can be a tricky balance to maintain. I'm not less important than anyone else, but I'm also not more important than anyone else. The point is not for me to win alone, but for us to win together; becoming more than the sum of our parts by looking after the health and the wellbeing of our shared community. But as tricky as maintaining this balance can be, it is the work which the Lord Jesus Christ has made our life's work. "Love your neighbor as yourself," he has said; promising that if you keep the community to which you and your neighbor belong healthy you both will prosper and the common good too. And if there's any question about why we should consistently seek this kind of me and we balance in our lives, our reading from 1<sup>st</sup> John certainly steps up to the plate with more than one answer.

For starters, there's the familiar refrain that Jesus did it for us so we should do it for others. There's also the reminder that as the clear winner on Easter morning, the One we now rightly hail as Lord of lords and King of kings, Jesus is quite worthy and deserving of our obedient commitment to the community-centered work he has sanctioned. But there's also what has become this decidedly Lutheran accent. As Christians, we go to work for each other not for extra credit, not to pay off the gift of salvation, but to grow in the confidence that we are in fact members of Christ's flock. When we love our neighbor as if they were our very self,

our reading from 1<sup>st</sup> John says we know that we are from the truth otherwise known as Jesus Christ. And as the same reading goes on to say, over time, this confidence that we are indeed members of Christ's flock becomes contagious; leading to greater and greater boldness and additional confirmation that Christ is our Good Shepherd and that we are sheep who hear and respond to his voice. And so, let's get busy; going to work for each other and the rest of our community. Not only because it shall be to everyone's benefit, but also because it will lead us to be more confident and competent Christians. Amen!