

August 31, 2014

“Labor of Love”

Exodus 3:7-12 Romans 12:14-21 Luke 6:20-21

First United Church of Arvada

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In commemoration of American workers on this Labor Day week-end I want to address a matter of some injustice.

The past three and a half decades have not been good ones for American workers. According to the 12th Edition of the State of Working America, since 1979 there has been an ever-widening gap between productivity in our nation and the median wages paid to our workers. For the past three and a half decades, the typical worker in this nation has not benefited from the increases in economic productivity. Instead, the rewards of increased productivity have been channeled to the top, to those with the most wealth, income, and political power, while the workers have only become poorer.

The Economic Policy Institute has declared much the same thing saying, “Wages for most workers grew exceptionally slowly between 1979 and 2012, despite productivity...rising 64 percent”. In other words, most Americans, even those with college degrees, are treading water—despite working more productively (and being better educated) than ever. Research demonstrates that wage stagnation, weak income growth, and wealth disparities can be traced to policy decisions that have eroded the bargaining power of low- and middle-wage workers.”

The U.S. poverty level in 2014 was \$23,850 (total yearly income) for a family of four. The 2012 Consensus declared that 16 percent of Americans lived in poverty. One in five children, or 16.1 million children lived in poverty in 2012 according to the “State of the Children’s” 2014 Report. Another way of looking at poverty is to consider how it looks in *relative* terms. “Relative poverty” can be defined as those people who have significantly less income and wealth than other members of their society. The relative poverty rate is a measure of income inequality. According to Steven Woolf in a 2014 publication of the National Research Council and Institute of

Medicine, beginning in the 1980s, relative poverty rates in the U.S. have been consistently higher than those of other wealthy nations.

There is much good information out there, not political rhetoric but thorough studies that document and analyze the condition of ordinary working Americans in our current economy. In 1964 President Lyndon Johnson declared a "War on Poverty." In the Stanford Center 2014 Report on Poverty and Inequality it was suggested that it might be time to consider a unified, rather than piece-meal, approach again, and they concluded,

If poverty is to be significantly reduced, we must find ways to ensure that the benefits of economic growth are more widely distributed than they have been in recent decades. The best way to do this is to adopt policies to increase the employment and earnings of the poor. Even with such a renewed focus on raising the market incomes of the poor, we must also continue to strengthen the safety net programs to prevent even more families from falling through the cracks.

It is Labor Day Week-end. Though it is celebrated by most Americans as the symbolic end of summer, it has a greater economic and civil purpose. It originated in 1882 as the Central Labor Union (of New York City) sought to create "a day off for the working citizens". It became a federal holiday in 1894. Then, in 1909, the Sunday preceding Labor Day was adopted as Labor Sunday-- a time to recognize the spiritual and educational aspects of the labor movement.

We just listened to the passage from the Old Testament in which God calls Moses to lead his people out of slavery. The Israelites were suffering under the harsh labor imposed upon them in Egypt. God heard their cries and asked Moses to deliver them. God called Moses to be his instrument and to work for justice for the people.

In the Epistles--Paul's letter to the Romans--it states some of the things that God is certainly calling us to do, today as well; Love genuinely. Weep with those who weep. Rejoice in hope. Take thought for what is noble. Live in harmony with one another. Associate with the lowly. Overcome evil with good.

And finally, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus says simply and directly, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God”.

On this Labor Day Sunday, is it possible that God is asking for our attention--that God is calling us to recognize the need for another journey of liberation--Perhaps waiting for us to notice something right here in plain sight that should not be happening, to pay attention, and to respond?

There is a simple heroism in the millions of individuals all over this nation who go to work each day-- who give all the energy they have, using most of the hours of their days at whatever level of skill or competence or intellect they might possess to do real work and to support themselves, their families, and their nation.

Long suffering American workers must be at the top of any political agenda. Both our scriptural roots and our national and historic roots call us to concern for those who are disadvantaged by the very structures of our communal life. Abraham Lincoln’s familiar line from his Second Annual Message to Congress in 1862, (regarding his perspective on freedom and the future of this nation) is a meaningful one for our times as well as his. He states that “In *giving* freedom to the *slave*, we *assure* freedom to the *free* -- honorable alike in what we give, and what we preserve. We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best, hope of earth.” And a far less familiar and poetic quote though no less significant, which he delivered a year earlier goes like this, “Labor is prior to, and independent of, capital. Capital is only the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is the superior of capital, and deserves much the higher consideration.”

As people of faith, on this Labor Day Sunday, we are called to love our neighbors and to live into God’s reign. We are called to do works of mercy and to give to those in need. But we are also called beyond charity—beyond putting band-aids on wounds. We are called to act—to work for justice – to read and understand and discuss these matters of inequality with each other; to organize, to vote, and to lobby to make changes in a social and economic system that must strive to be fair to all Americans who work or want to

work. God spoke to Moses with these words, “I have observed the misery of my people...I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters...Indeed, I know their sufferings and I have come down to deliver them... So come, I will send you...”

In part two of my message today, I want to celebrate the dedicated volunteer work of the people of this church. Let’s return to the words of our Call to Worship this morning. Here, we spoke of *liturgy as* “the work of the people.” In worship we are invited, individually and together, to do the kind of inner work , which makes our outer work in the world, more meaningful and purposeful. Here, in worship, we receive the inspiration to see how our small acts work together toward the “Great Work of God.” We can pause to sense the powerful and deep mystery in which we exist together, and allow our gratitude to bloom, to grow and to find expression in our faithful action.

“Being Church” is the work of the people. Liturgy takes place in worship but also in all aspects of church life—from mowing the lawn to fixing the coffee. Jeri Lou is not the only liturgist this morning. The work of the people of a church, the labors of love, are all a part of its liturgy. The people of First United Church of Arvada know this and live this year after year. Singing and quilting and teaching and budgeting are labors of love. Book discussions and mission trips, Bible study and running the sound and media systems are labors of love. Doing puppet plays and building birdhouses, reaching out to those who are hurting and sharing in each other’s happiness are labors of love. Celebrations of births and loving good byes at death, making our church pledges and ringing the bells. Writing our stories and tending our garden, Telephone calls and prayer chains, hospital visits and cards of concern. Strategic planning, serving on church boards and committees, counting the offering, keeping the books and designing our website. Charitable giving and community service. Attempts at understanding the roots of social problems and learning to accept our differences. All of these are labors of love. They are the liturgy of daily life in our church community.

At times, along the way, some of this labor feels burdensome. At times we grow weary or angry or discouraged with the pace, or the inconsistencies or the seeming lack of resources to do our work. There are times of crisis and dark nights of the soul for all people and all communities of people. Then, suddenly and unexpectedly may come new understanding, forgiveness, comfort, peace and a sense of even deeper purpose. Burdens are transformed into blessings and we sense the work of God in it all. We must believe this, because however limited or flawed we may be, this world needs what we represent as a church and what we have to give.

This Labor Day let us recognize and give thanks for the work of the people of our church as we live together in this vital faith community, as we seek to be responsive to the rapid changes of society and as we heed God's call to face and embrace the suffering of the world.