

Labor Pains

[Texts -Amos 8:4-12;
James 2:1-8; 15-17]

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Since I generally follow the liturgically assigned readings throughout our Church Year, it's rare for me to preach a "Labor Day" sermon. After all, Labor Day isn't exactly a "High Holy Day" on the Church Calendar! And in today's culture, Labor "Day" has morphed into a three-day weekend to relax and *forget* about labor and laborers. It's a time for cookouts and pool parties. It's a great time to buy appliances, electronics, and [for some reason] mattresses - from 30 to 60% off, 0% financing, 90 days-same-as-cash! Of course, Labor Day originally was about much more than leisure time, or finding a high-quality mattress at a reasonable price - though it certainly had a lot to do with work hours and economics.

In the late 1800's, the average American laborer worked 12 hours a day, six days a week, just to eke-out a meager living. Despite legal restrictions, children as young as 6 and 7 labored as "helpers" in mills, mines, and factories - earning a fraction of adult wages. People of all ages - particularly newly arrived immigrants - worked brutally long hours in unsafe working conditions, for pitifully poor pay. When Labor Day was first conceived, it was seen as a critical opportunity to advocate for and raise-up these devalued people. On September 5th, 1882, 10,000 workers took unpaid time-off, to march from New York City Hall to Union Square, thereby holding the first "Labor Day" parade in U.S. history. In a few years, celebrations spread to other cities throughout the country, as workers united in the struggle to win safer working conditions, more reasonable hours, and better wages. In August 1894, President Grover Cleveland signed a law designating the first Monday in September as a Federal Holiday, called *Labor Day*. This wasn't because he was a supporter of labor unions. He was trying to repair political damage caused earlier that summer, when he sent 12,000 federal troops to put down a strike by the American Railway Union at the Pullman Railway Company near Chicago. That

action resulted in 34 workers being killed and 57 seriously wounded. And though Grover Cleveland ended-up losing the presidency, Labor Day won a permanent place on our nation's calendars.

Now I realize that in 2015, the story of Labor Day's beginnings may seem like an quaintly irrelevant history lesson. However, within the United States, and around the world, the gap between the rich and the poor continues to grow ever wider. Unemployment, and underemployment, remains a chronic problem - often due to flawed corporate policies and hiring schemes that keep workers at part-time hours to avoid paying them benefits. In the U.S. some 45 million people live in poverty, and another 60 million have income levels below what experts describe as "adequate". Yet while millions struggle, the United States remains an extremely wealthy country. Over the past 40 years as wages for many have stagnated or even decreased, the economy as a whole has continued to grow. But when that prosperity isn't beneficial to *all*, the ensuing results prevent us all from living the good and wholesomely interconnected lives that the Holy One envisions for us.

Many poor people *do* work, but they earn too little to get out of poverty. And this problem is definitely compounded when many of society's rich and politically powerful view poor people as being somehow less valuable and less deserving than *they* are. ["They're losers, I don't like losers, I like winners! If they don't wanna be losers, they should just work harder and make more money - it's as simple as that!"] Every day, you and I encounter people who are hurting economically. They wait on us in restaurants and stores, they clean our homes and offices, they take care of our aging family and friends, they walk-by us on the street. So perhaps we should ask ourselves: "Do we truly see these people as having an intrinsic, Infinitely Divine value?" And if so, "How can we be silent, as they continue to be abused by an economic system that propagates wages that are too low, and work hours that are too few and undependable?" As this morning's Readings remind us, economic justice isn't just some abstract political talking-point; it is a core component of our Faith, which deserves our attention *and* our action.

In our Old Testament reading, Amos vehemently condemns those merchants who just can't wait for the Sabbath day of rest to be over, so that they can return to their money-making exploitation of the poor. His phrase "buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals" refers to the practice of dragging people whose debt may merely be the cost of a pair of sandals, into even greater debt - by compounding interest, or by having them imprisoned until the debt is paid. "Selling the sweepings of the wheat" is prohibited by Old Testament Law, because those scattered remnants are supposed to be left for the poor - a kind of 8th Century B.C.E. hunger-relief program. Yet Amos observes that landowners - hungry for more money - not only sweep-up every last grain, but then turn-around and sell it to the very people who should have had free access to it. And the greed doesn't stop there! Many merchants also use inaccurate scales to weigh their grain, in order to further fleece those pathetic poor people.

In our New Testament reading, James reminds us that the people of God must show the same respect and consideration to *all* people, regardless of their economic or social status. Yet it's easy for us to make judgements about other people's position, or condition - even their worth as a human being - based simply on the way they look, or talk, or what they wear. We think we have people pegged because of their race or religion, their neighborhood or community, their job - or lack thereof. Making snap judgments based on people's appearances [and our own prejudices], can be an easy thing to do. People do have observable differences; yet you and I are called to look at all people equally, and to value and treat each person with the same respect and dignity that we ourselves desire.

Our common heritage as children of the One Creator outweighs *any* differences that we might have. So maybe, a few other questions to ask ourselves are these:

"Can you and I truly see the Holy One in *everyone*, and recognize each person as our sister or brother?"

“Do we make snap judgments about the unemployed or low-wage workers, that lead us to view them as being somehow less worthy than others?”

“Do you and I passively absorb the political rhetoric that, ‘low-wage workers don’t deserve better jobs or pay, because they’re basically lazy and not very bright?’”

The United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries uses a phrase that reminds us of the intrinsic value of people who work in low-wage jobs: “*Jesus was a low-wage worker!*” Jesus was a low-wage worker! He didn’t get Cleveland Clinic kind of cash for treating leprosy, blindness, or hearing loss. He didn’t collect a Clintonesque speaker’s fee for his Sermon on the Mount. Jesus owned no land, no house no valuable commodities. The only property he owned was the robe he wore, which was taken-away with a toss of the dice, as he suffered and died on a criminal’s cross. A snap judgment would put Jesus on the lowest level of human society. Yet you and I know the true worth of Jesus Christ - his intrinsic and his Infinitely Divine value! So here are 2 final questions for you and me to ponder on this Labor Day Weekend: “Can the Christ-Spirit in us, recognize the Christ-Spirit in *all* the people around us? And if those people happen to be poor, are you and I willing to do something about it?”