

Living, Working, in **God's** World

Rohnert Park – St. John's UMC

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

September 6 (Labor Day Weekend), 2015

While Labor Day is often regarded as the last chance for a long summer weekend at the beach or with friends, it also offers an opportunity to reflect spiritually on the deeper significance of this national holiday. Do you know anything about its origins and significance? How does it connect with our journeys of faith? And where is God in all of this?

The celebration of Labor Day—a day of rest and respect—emerged out of conflict. First celebrated in 1882 by the Central Labor Union in Boston, "Labor Day" became a federal holiday in 1894 in response to the deaths of a number of workers during the Pullman Strike between labor unions and railroads. Sadly, government was pitted against the people as U.S. marshals and military forces were responsible for the deaths of striking workers. In response to this abuse of power, President Grover Cleveland made reconciliation with the labor movement a top national priority.

The labor movement, often in partnership with Christian leaders, went on to become the source of many of the benefits and rights that both blue and white collar employees hold dear today: vacations, holidays, workers compensation, days off, health insurance, disability, and collective bargaining. Although the church was often at the sidelines and even, in some cases, opposed workers' rights, the Social Gospel movement affirmed the intersection of faith and social ethics and played a major role in securing justice for working people.

But Labor Day is more than historic and symbolic. It reflects the prophetic concern for justice for the hardworking, the poor, the vulnerable. The prophetic writings in our Bible and the gospel message consistently affirm the rights of laborers and the dispossessed in relationship to wealthy landowners and greedy business people. Economics matters in the biblical tradition. What people eat and where they live is a spiritual as well as an economic and political issue. Disparity of income and power is a recurring biblical concern: the widows, landless persons, and unemployed people matter to God. Just as God heard the cries of the oppressed Israelites, God hears the cries of the poor. Jesus' ministry embraced rich and poor alike, but his most controversial acts involved his inclusion of outsiders - people at the margins of the religious, social, and economic worlds - as members of the realm of God, deserving care in this life as

well as the next.

And so we come to today's scriptures. In our scripture, the people at the margins of the religious, social, and economic worlds include the upstart Gentile woman and her daughter. The discomfort caused by this story challenges us to examine how we treat the "Gentiles," persons from other racial or ethnic or socio-economic backgrounds, in our midst. How welcome are the poor in our churches? While the words of Jesus are harsh and while it would be wrong to feed the dogs food that the children need, everyone who heard the woman's response knew that dogs were permitted to eat what the children dropped under the table. Her retort reverses prejudices on both sides of the debate. Perhaps more than a miracle of healing at a distance, the miracle is the overcoming of prejudice and boundaries that separate children of God, who are both the haves and the have nots.

The healing of the deaf man reminds us that God's power is at work, whether healing takes place through our normal medical interventions or as an unexpected event. Hearing and speech have a symbolic role to play in Mark. The Gentile woman was so skilled in speech that Jesus healed her daughter. Jesus' disciples have shown increasing difficulty in understanding what Jesus is telling them. They clearly need some form of healing that will enable them to truly hear... that is, to understand. Understanding, on the other hand, can be expressed to others only if we speak. For us, it is the challenge to continually work to make the church a place where all people are welcome and to invite and include them... all.

This is not merely a matter of class struggle but the recognition of God's Shalom, Kin-dom, Realm, Reign, in which property and wealth are ultimately a matter of spiritual stewardship rather than private ownership. The scriptures do not oppose property ownership or wealth, but see them as part of God's care for the whole earth. The earth is God's, the economy is a matter of justice, and care for the vulnerable is a moral and spiritual requirement. And who are they, these vulnerable?

In her movie *Wendy and Lucy*, independent film maker Kelly Reichardt explores the people in America who are one sickness or accident away from personal catastrophe. Wendy and her dog Lucy are stranded in a depressing mill town in Oregon after leaving Indiana for a better life in Alaska. Wendy is frugal and resourceful. She records her expenditures in a spiral notebook. She sleeps in her car, collects cans and bottles for spare change, and freshens up in gas station bathrooms.

After fruitless attempts to find work, Wendy observes to a security guard

who's befriended her that you can't get a job without an address or phone number. She has neither, of course. "Heck," he replies, "you can't get an address without an address, or a job without a job. It's all rigged." Minor infractions with rule-keeping bureaucrats reap major consequences for Wendy. When her twenty-year-old car needs over a thousand dollars in repairs, we find her, in the last scene, hopping a train. Where will she go? What will happen to her?

In *The Working Poor, Invisible in America* (2004), Pulitzer Prize winner David Shipler shows how for people like Wendy poverty can be both a cause of problems and the result of problems: "A run-down apartment can exacerbate a child's asthma, which leads to a call for an ambulance, which generates a medical bill that cannot be paid, which ruins a credit record, which hikes the interest rate on an auto loan, which forces the purchase of an unreliable used car, which jeopardizes a mother's punctuality at work, which limits her promotions and earning capacity, which confines her to poor housing." And yet, we often blame the poor for their poverty; although some of the hardest-working people are poor people.

Barbara Ehrenreich has made a career as a writer, authoring a dozen books. In her best-seller, *Nickel and Dimed; On (not) Getting By in America* (2001), she describes how for six months she lived the life of an unskilled but fully employed wage earner.

In Florida she worked as a waitress on the 2:00-10PM shift, then as a house cleaner for Molly Maid. In Maine she worked as a "dietary aide" at a nursing home and as a hotel maid. In Minnesota she clerked at Wal-Mart, the largest private employer in the nation with 825,000 people on the payroll. Ehrenreich lived in budget motels and dangerous trailer parks, she ate only what she could afford (which tended to be fast food), she discovered that she needed two unskilled jobs just to squeak by, and overall found herself physically and emotionally drained.

The unskilled wage earners that both Shipler and Ehrenreich portray constitute about 30% of the American work force who earn less than the federal minimum wage per hour (cf. the Economic Policy Institute). They are the people we pass every day who make our American way of life possible. They clean our office buildings at night, serve us at restaurants, repair our cars, handpick our fresh produce, and mow-n-blow our suburban yards. They often work in industries and environments that are unhealthy. Even though these people work long and hard, they barely make ends meet. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, "in the median state a minimum wage worker would have to

work 89 hours each week to afford a two-bedroom apartment at 30% of his or her income, which is the federal definition of affordable housing.”

So what are we to do or think as followers of Jesus? Paul was a latecomer to the Gospel who converted on the road to Damascus around the year 35 CE. Fourteen years after his conversion, he traveled to Jerusalem to seek the favor of the original group of twelve apostles. He knew that he needed their acceptance and blessing, and indeed he received what he calls “the right hand of fellowship” from the movement’s leaders. Later, when he recalled this trip in his letter to the Galatians, Paul wrote something revealing about the first followers of Jesus. What did the leaders of the Jesus movement in Jerusalem require of Paul? “All they asked was that we should remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.” (Galatians 2:10).

Labor Day, then, offers us a reminder and challenge to affirm the value of work, all work, to seek healthy workplace environments, and support opportunities for entrepreneurial adventure in the context of a just social safety net. This Labor Day weekend, let us give thanks for those whose efforts have led to workers rights and care for the least of these. And let us make a commitment to seek justice for all workers and balance the need for profitmaking with care for our society's most vulnerable members.

Will you join me in a Litany for Labor Day...