

A communion meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Pentecost 12, September 4, 2011, dedicated to all who labor in Ohio and those seeking employment in our state, and always to the glory of God!

“To Work and to Love”

Romans 13:9-13; Matthew 20:1-16

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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There is no more cherished word in the Christian vocabulary than “grace.” Simply defined, grace describes the mercy of God, demonstrated in countless ways, to undeserving people. Grace is unmerited. It is free. Grace is difficult for most to grasp and many to accept. It often gets sweetened like saccharine sweetens and becomes divorced from its connection to God’s righteousness. Nothing jars the sentimentality of Grace like the parable of the laborers in the vineyard in Matthew 20:1-16.

Speaking to his disciples while instructing them as they move from the peaceful setting of the Sea of Galilee to the tumultuous battleground of Jerusalem, Jesus offers this insiders story (for all of us to hear) about divine grace. Attempting to teach that “the last shall be first and the first shall be last,” Jesus tells this story of laborers all being paid the same day’s wage for vastly different hours of labor.

For those who have worked from sun-up (6 a.m.) to sundown (6 p.m.), they are paid four denarius. This would be about \$80 a day. Now, you must bear in mind, in the first century unskilled

workers and soldiers were both paid one denarius a day. So, four denarius would have been four times the common daily wage. But, we are told, those who start at 9 a.m., noon and even 5 p.m., thus working nine hours, six hours and one hour are ALSO paid four denarius.

When pay for the day comes, those who have worked 12 hours react strongly. “Why are we all being paid the same?” The owner responds, “I paid you a fair wage - the wage I promised to pay. Furthermore, what I do with my money is my business.” They are right. He is right. End of story. Or is it?

While we all know wage theft is a real issue in our times when more than 2-3 million laborers are paid less than the minimum wage and exploited as laborers, this is a story of wage fairness and wage extravagance! Everyone is paid well - four times the minimum wage! Some are treated like day laboring kings with the pay they receive!

How do we grasp this? It is grace. We can't explain it any other way.

The grumblers are not really against grace. They just don't like grace shown to others. We see that in lots of ways in our daily lives. A new person comes into our school or our workplace, and we see the boss or teacher treat them well. We assume that they like them better. Some folks grumble that pastors pay more attention to new members, or certain ages of members or certain small groups - on and on the grumbling goes.

Is it possible, that grace is abounding? Is it possible that the free and unmerited love and welcome, that extravagant care is actually felt and extended to everyone - following the “Jesus Way” of practicing radical love and hospitality for ALL?

Time and time again the stories of scripture point us to a way of love and welcome. We see Jonah sitting on a hill pouting while God spares the city of Nineveh from destruction. We see the older brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son gnashing his teeth when

his father welcomes his screw-up brother home and throws a party. We see the self-righteous Pharisee praying to God thanking God that he is not like the sinful Publican (who is praying to God asking forgiveness for his sins). In each story, God is the Grace-giver. In each story, the grumbler cannot understand grace when it is right in front of them. Too often we are so merit driven, we can't see grace when it smiles in our face.

This past Wednesday, I received a phone call from someone I didn't know. He had read in The Columbus Dispatch that pastors from We Believe Ohio were gathering to oppose Issue 2. He explained that as a worker, in a union, his pension had been gutted by his employer. He was angry and unhappy that he was receiving so little pension. Therefore, he felt Issue 2 should be passed. Because he had been treated badly, he felt others should know it was coming on them as well. I was confused by the call. Why would he want ill for those who were seeking fairness and the right to collectively bargain when he had lost that battle? It was as if to say, no one should receive what I have lost. The sadness and anger behind the call was stunning. It spoke to the grace missing in the economics of our times.

On this Labor Day weekend, there are many issues in our land and in our state facing workers and employers. Story after story in our scriptures calls laborers and employers to work out ways of fairness, justice and mercy. They call for God's grace in troubling times. Matthew 20:1-16 offers extravagant grace and extraordinary wages to all, no matter how long or how hard they work. This is a vision which totally turns the world upside down.

Some would say the church has no role to play on state issues - especially those dealing with labor and employers. Here at First Church we know the opposite is true! For over 100 years ago the preachers from the pulpit of First Church have cried out for equity and justice on the labor question.

One-hundred years ago, our senior minister, the Rev. Dr. Washington Gladden, reflected on the "labor question." He said: "The labor question is in part an economic question, and all

economic questions are fundamentally religious questions. (In fact), there are no purely spiritual interests, since spiritual forces all incarnate themselves in the facts of every-day life, and can only be known as they are there manifested. . . . There is indeed danger that the Church will make mistakes in dealing with such questions, but that the greatest of all mistakes is in ignoring them. . . . There are no souls that are more in need of saving than the souls . . . getting entangled in the materialisms that undervalue manhood; and there are no people who need moral guidance more than those who are grappling with the manifold phases of the labor question.

How true! All economic questions are fundamentally religious questions. There are no spiritual forces that do not manifest themselves in the facts of everyday life.

The labor question and economic questions related to them are ever-pressing on us in Ohio this Labor Day Sabbath. Employment injustice seems to be escalating in our times. The over-employed work long hours in six- and seven-day work weeks with little to no additional compensation. The under-employed scramble to piece together two and three jobs with no benefits and no perks. The unemployed are out of work; some are churning through savings, others are sinking into debt, but all are struggling to survive as unemployment payments end. We count over 529,000 Ohioans in this category alone.

Now, there is a frightening new force at work to undermine fairness within the public sector where 360,000 Ohioans currently work. These men and women have made financial sacrifices that have saved Ohio taxpayers \$250 million and an additional \$100 million in health-care costs in the last few years. They are our teachers, police, firefighters, state highway patrol officers, librarians, nurses, and public workers who have done their part to help government make ends meet by taking pay freezes five times in nine years and taking furlough days without pay. Now they're under assault through Ballot Issue 2.

More than 70% of Ohioans support collective bargaining. So for those who call this an issues for the Democrats only, last time I

checked this state does not have 70% of its voters registered as Democrats. This is an issue for all Ohioans. My heart breaks with 529,000 Ohioans looking for work. I believe it is wrong and immoral to deny 360,000 employed, tax-paying public servants of their rights and quite possibly, their livelihoods. I believe Issue 2 is bad law. It gives employers rights they do not need and strips employees of rights they do need.

Out of a text and time that calls for grace and reconciliation of differences, we need to find better ways to work out of our economic travails than this. Undervaluing the humanity of our state's public employees is not the way to save our state budget.

The late German theologian Dorothee Soelle, working with themes from Sigmund Freud, wrote a little book many years ago called *To Love and to Work*. Dr. Freud believed that the definition of a sane person was one who was able to balance a life of work and love. How simple. How true.

Dr. Soelle wrote: "My book is an attempt to affirm our being created and becoming creators, being liberated and becoming agents of liberation, being loved and becoming lovers." (p. 157) She believed that work is not in essence God's curse (as some interpreters would have us believe in Genesis), but rather as God's intent for human liberation.

She wrote that "liberating work" has three basic dimensions: self-expression (as in Dorothy Day's Catholic Worker movement), social relatedness (a spiritual relationship of the worker to community), and reconciliation with nature (as opposed to the distorted view that seeks to dominate the earth, and with it the poor). Freud, Soelle and the scriptures are right: To work and to love are, indeed, central to our humanization. Now, we need to find a way for grace and love to help us become more human in our times.

Today, I invite you to begin this journey of grace-filled exploration at Christ's table of grace - our communion table. Here we are given a free gift of extravagant love. The gift of our Savior is

broken and poured out for us. He invites us to come to the table - not because we must, but because we may. He invites us to come labor on in the work that is set before us - the work of love and justice - emboldened and empowered by the grace he gives us. Amen.

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