

More Than a Picnic: A Meditation on Labor Day 2019

Jeremiah 2:4-13 Psalm 81:1, 10-16

September 1, 2019

“Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have;”

--Hebrews 12:5a

Oh how I wish we were having our usual hymn sing this Labor Day weekend.
Share a couple of tunes together, everyone goes away happy.

But, this week we are greeted with the words of the prophet, Jeremiah.
Words that call people into account for their misguided behavior: for trying to do things
their own way, instead of Yahweh’s way.

“My people have committed two evils!” God laments.

“They have forsaken the Lord, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for
themselves.... cisterns that can hold no water.”

In other words: “That’s not going to work for you, folks. You will try and try to satisfy
yourselves, store up enough for yourselves.... but you will always run dry.”

“*This* is the desire God has for God’s people,” says the psalmist:

“I would feed you with the finest wheat. With honey from the rock...and you would be
satisfied.”

And you would be satisfied.

As we reflect a bit on this weekend, with the celebration of Labor Day; as we
contemplate our work, and the work of others; as we take note of labor customs and
practices that have formed and changed and adapted over time in our country, it is good
for us to spend a moment with the prophet, with the psalmist, with the words of the text
from Hebrews (on the cover) so that we can – with humble hearts --come to the table that
is spread before us to feast on the goodness of God. We can turn our awareness to what it
is that truly satisfies, the places where we are truly fed and truly faithful. So let us begin.

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Prophets hold people to account.

And I discovered a prophet this week whose prayers for those who labor and for those
who are entrusted with the labor of others, spoke to me with amazing insight and power.
Even though those prayers were written more than 100 years ago, I still hear them
speaking.

Walter Rauschenbusch was a pastor in Hell's Kitchen, in New York City, an early proponent of the social justice movement. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was among many who were inspired by his words.

Hear the prophetic words of this prayer entitled FOR MEN IN BUSINESS (published in 1910)

We plead with thee, O God, for our brothers who are pressed by the cares and beset by the temptations of business life. We acknowledge before thee our common guilt for the hardness and deceitfulness of industry and trade which lead us all into temptation and cause even the righteous to slip and fall.

Since the wealth and welfare of our nation are controlled by our business men, cause them to realize that they serve not themselves alone, but hold high public functions, and do thou save them from betraying the interests of the many for their own enrichment, lest a new tyranny grow up in a land that is dedicated to freedom.

Grant them farsighted patriotism to subordinate their profits to the public weal, and a steadfast determination to transform the disorder of the present into the nobler and freer harmony of the future.

(For God and the People: Prayers of the Social Awakening, Boston, The Pilgrim Press, 1910)

I'm telling you ---- I love this man's prayers! (and look how they're printed!)

His prayer concludes, asking us to bring our business life "under Christ's law of service" so that all would be blessed.

I came across Rauschenbusch's prayers shortly after having read two articles, one from the Washington Post, another from the New York Times.

On Tuesday, August 20th, an article appeared with the headline:

[Group of top CEOs says maximizing shareholder profits no longer can be the primary goal of corporations](#) (Washington Post, Jena McGregor)

On Monday, a group representing the nation's most powerful chief executives met and concluded that the usual practice of companies maximizing profits for shareholders above all else, may not be the best one for the rest of society.

It's a practice, they stated, that can be blamed for rising inequality and it does not balance "the needs of shareholders with customers, employees, suppliers and local communities." And they affirmed that "that best-run companies put the customer first and invest in their employees and communities."

Well you could have knocked me over with a feather when I read that one.

“Shareholder primacy,” as it is known, is the belief that it is a corporation’s duty to maximize shareholder value, a belief that became prominent in the mid-1980’s.

It involves putting profits ahead of the needs of workers. It fixates on short-term results. And it certainly helped balloon CEO pay packages and outsized stock awards.

I was a student at the University of Pennsylvania, home of the famous Wharton Business School, taking my freshman class in economics when I became aware of this kind of practice. I was awed and amazed – and appalled --- by the justification, in fact, glorification of greed, that was in the very air. Do you remember the slogan? “Greed is good!” (Do you remember who said it?: Gordon Gekko in the movie *Wall Street*, 1987)

We know that our economic system is incredibly inequitable. (I just read in the New York Times this morning about billionaire financiers profiting from tax breaks meant to help low income areas.) And we’ll be hearing many, many words about how to reform, reshape, and readjust our economic and financial systems as we continue to head into the next election cycle. It’s a discussion that we as a nation must have. We need to have. But I was surprised. Pleased, and very surprised, to hear it from the CEOs themselves.

[\(New York Times, How a Trump Tax Break to Help Poor Communities Became a Windfall for the Rich, Jesse Drucker & Eric Lipton\)](#)

O Lord..... may they hear the words of the prophet and the scriptures:

Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have.

Here is a second prayer from my newly-discovered prayer prophet.

AGAINST THE SERVANTS OF MAMMON

We cry to thee for justice, O Lord, for our soul is weary with the iniquity of greed. Behold the servants of Mammon, who defy thee and drain their fellow-men for gain; who grind down the strength of the workers by merciless toil and fling them aside when they are mangled and worn; who rackrent the poor and make dear the space and air which thou hast made free...

That prayer, to my surprise, continues on and includes a heart-sick lament for the practice of slavery, and notes that its effects still echo throughout the nation.

The very day the previous article about the CEOs was published, August 20th, was the approximate date that 400 years before, a ship arrived at Point Comfort, Virginia, bearing “20 and odd Africans” who were sold to the colonists. It is a place marker – noting our tragic and lamentable history of enslaving Africans, people of color, and continuing that practice for over 200 years.

The second article I had mentioned earlier was in the New York Times Magazine and is part of [The 1619 Project](#), 1619 being the year that that ship arrived in what is now Hampton, Virginia. Written by Matthew Desmond, the article identifies how much of our

modern economic system is based on the practices that evolved from the management of enslaved labor on pre-Civil War plantations. It was on the plantation that spreadsheets were developed to track per-worker productivity, and capital costs were quantified on land, tools, and on the enslaved workforce. “Perhaps most remarkable,” the article claims, “they also developed ways to calculate depreciation, a breakthrough in modern management procedures, by assessing the market value of enslaved workers over their life spans. Values generally peaked between the prime ages of 20 and 40 but were individually adjusted up or down based on sex, strength and temperament: people reduced to data points.”

Even banking practices were part of the system with enslaved people being used as collateral for mortgages. Thomas Jefferson, for example, mortgaged 150 of his enslaved workers to finance the building of Monticello.

[\(American Capitalism is Brutal: You Can Trace that to the Plantation, New York Times Magazine, August 18, 2019\)](#)

If you haven’t yet gone to see the musical, *Hamilton*, I hope you have a chance to listen to the remarkable lyrics of this phenomenal show. (And believe me, you have to listen to them about 6 or 7 times before you catch them all, they come at you so fast.)

But there’s a scene in Act 2 when Hamilton and Jefferson are facing off about the creation of the new nation’s financial system, and how banking and the debt system will work when Hamilton retorts to Jefferson saying:

*A civics lesson from a slaver, hey neighbor,
Your debts are paid cause you don’t pay for labor
‘We plant seeds in the South. We create.’
Yeah, keep ranting,
We know who’s really doing the planting.*

(Lin-Manuel Miranda, *Hamilton: An American Musical*, 2015)

To hear the words of the prophets, to be accountable to God, requires an honest look at who we are and how we behave. In labor systems and practices. Financial systems. Economic systems. We need to see, we need to acknowledge and we need to lament. We are developing greater awareness of the legacy of slavery and the racism that shape and form our systems. We realize that our work practices need reforms. We know that there are those for whom work is demeaning, who labor under poor conditions. We know that pay is unfair. That for some, labor is forced and without rest, or freedom or dignity. That some are coerced, endangered, abused or exploited. We know that there are those who seek labor and find none. And others who are prevented from meaningful work and opportunity.

(Adapted from [RevMarie2012/09/03; A Prayer for Labour Day, northbay.ca/wordpress/?p=306](http://RevMarie2012/09/03/A-Prayer-for-Labour-Day-northbay.ca/wordpress/?p=306))

And so we are called to repent, as Christ's disciples, to have the courage to take an honest look; to change our minds and ways and transform into new ways --- ways that give truth, and meaning, and wholeness in life.

These last two stories that I want to share with you.... I wasn't sure I was going to include them. They seem so small in comparison with CEOs and with 400 years of racism, but I decided to keep them in because they are the struggles of two controversial individuals taking a look at their work, and discerning what it is that creates for them a healthy life, one of wholeness and well being.

I also figured it would give you something to talk about during fellowship hour.

So first, I mention Colin Kaepernick, a football quarterback who took a stand, by taking a knee, not against America, but in protest of its racist policies and practices. Though he has led a team to the Super Bowl, and quite likely has the ability to do this again, he has wound up not being considered hireable in the National Football League.

The second is Andrew Luck, who last week suddenly announced his retirement from the Indianapolis football team. He'd been their quarterback, picked at the top of the 2012 draft, playing standout football after replacing legend Peyton Manning, selected for the Pro Bowl four times. He's got plenty of playing life left in him. But, at the age of 29, he decided to walk away from approximately 60 million in potential salary and bonuses, and potentially hundreds of millions more. He made this decision because he was tired of being in pain (it's an unbelievably violent game), and he couldn't give his team the 110% dedication it requires. True...he already made about \$97 million in his career. His choices aren't going to be exactly the rest of ours. But he weighed it carefully and doesn't seem to have made this choice lightly. He opted for wholeness. And I respect him for that. As I do for Colin Kaepernick.

We all need to weigh our lives in the light of what God asks of us, each of us, in our own unique situations. And I pray that there would be honesty of spirit, clarity of vision, faithfulness to God in each of our decisions.

The prophet speaks for the Lord: "My people have forsaken me, the fountain of living water. They have dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked systems that can hold no water." "O that my people would listen to me, to walk in my way." "But I would feed them, with the finest of wheat, and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you."

As we come to this table, it is Christ who calls us. Christ who forgives us. Christ who feeds us for the tasks of righteousness so that we will be sustained on the journey. It is Christ who shares God's goodness so that all can be satisfied. Though these be small morsels of bread and cup, this is more than a picnic ---- it is a table of abundance. A table of transformation. A table of hope. A table of grace.

As we are fed for the work that lies before us, our work together, and the work we each face every day, I offer one more prayer from my prophet.

(A) MORNING PRAYER(S). Let us pray:

O God, we thank thee for the sweet refreshment of sleep and for the glory and vigor of the new day. As we set our faces once more toward our daily work, we pray thee for the strength sufficient for our tasks. May Christ's spirit of duty and service ennoble all we do. Uphold us by the consciousness that our work is useful work and a blessing to all. If there has been anything in our work harmful to others and dishonorable to ourselves, reveal it to our inner eye with such clearness that we shall hate it and put it away, though it be at a loss to ourselves.

When we work with others, help us to regard them, not as servants to our will, but as (people) equal to us in human dignity, and equally worth of their full reward. May there be nothing in this day's work of which we shall be ashamed when the sun has set, nor in the eventide of our life when our task is done and we go to our long home to meet thy face. Amen.