

“Work – Gift and Necessity”

Ephesians 4:15-16, Mark 10:42-45

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About two years ago after listening to my kids talk about what books they read in HS and college, I decided that my literary background was significantly deficient. My kids wanted to talk about books that any English teacher would have said are essential for basic competency in the literary world. I hadn't read Jack London, or John Steinbeck, Jane Austen or William Faulkner, Cervantes or Socrates.

So I decided I would start reading some books that I considered vetted classics. *Don Quixote*, *Anna Karenina*, *Call of the Wild*, and now, *The Grapes of Wrath*. I am finding this journey very interesting. I don't know exactly why I chose *The Grapes of Wrath* to read right now, but as we muddle through some economic difficulties in the US I am finding Steinbeck's insights from the great depression to be relevant for today.

As many of you know *The Grapes of Wrath* is the story of the Joad family that is displaced from their subsistence life on a piece of land located in the dust bowl of the 1930's. The Joads set their sights on moving to California where they have heard there are jobs and opportunity, but when they arrive they find a very hostile and exploitive world. When they find even temporary work, because they are part of a mass population shift to California, employers pay such low wages that the workers make barely enough to buy food for their families day-to-day. The displaced families work for pennies an hour because if they don't there are plenty of others who will work in order to avoid starving. The Joads and hundreds of thousands of others are at the mercy of rich California agribusiness men.

The *Grapes of Wrath* is a story about maintaining personal dignity in the midst of extreme poverty. It is a study of economic forces and how they are manipulated for the benefit of the few and the degradation of the many. And finally it is a testimony to the strength of families and communities of people that offer hope and compassion in the midst of hardship.

At one point in the novel, when things are particularly bleak, Tom Joad and Ma Joad have a conversation during which Tom quotes the Bible verses that describe how three strands of cord are stronger than one alone, and how it is good for people to be together so if one falls another is there to help him or her get up.

Though Ma Joad did not have the eloquence of her son, she was the one throughout the story who knew and acted upon the meaning of Tom's words – she worked to keep her family together and to build good relationships where ever they went.

It is Labor Day weekend. Labor Day was established in the 1880's to honor workers and to reinforce the common bonds of workers in order to make progress on common struggles. Like *The Grapes of Wrath*, Labor Day has always pointed out the intersection of work as a necessity of

life, and work as a source of dignity. Both the novel and this holiday point out the value of work, how it can be one of the deeply satisfying dimensions of life; how it engages us in both contributing to our world and how it offers a way to receive what we need to survive.

The novel and this holiday are also testimonies to the destructive dimensions of economic systems that regard human beings as commodities to be managed in order to achieve greater profitability. When any business or corporation begins speaking of human beings as they might speak of other business holdings, it is a certainty that people's lives are being diminished.

From the earliest writings of our Judeo-Christian faith we have tried to understand why we must work in order gather or grow the food that we need and to create shelter for our families. In the 3rd chapter of the book of Genesis, in response to Adam taking a bite from the metaphoric apple, God tells Adam, "By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food," meaning, no longer will you be prancing naked around my garden without helping to tend it.

While the launching of Adam into the world of work is biblically placed in a punitive context, it seems to me that this story is more about growing up and engaging another dimension of life. For the most part I think the biblical writers were reality based – the stories they told were meant to help people embrace life rather than fight against it.

Keeping with this biblical spirit of reality I have tried to listen to descriptions of what work is like for people today.

Perhaps the most prevalent description of work in the U.S. and actually around the world is that of unemployment. In the U.S. the current rate of people applying for unemployment benefits is 9.7%, some economists say the true rate is around 16%. In August alone the U.S. is said to have lost 216,000 jobs – all this means there are 12-13 million people looking for employment in the U.S.. This is the highest rate of unemployment since 1983.

So far the economic recovery in the U.S. is being described as a "jobless" recovery because businesses have not begun hiring again.

I heard the other day that right now is the first time in U.S. history that there are actually more women employed out of the home than there are men.

The percentage of U.S. workers that receive health benefits through their employer is down to 30-35%. This is part of a downward trend that began at least 25 years ago.

For several years now people around the U.S. have voiced their opposition to jobs from U.S. companies being "sent overseas." Companies have said they cannot compete in the global market without reducing labor costs and people in other parts of the world work for a fraction of the cost that people in the U.S. do.

This past week a man, his wife and their young son came into our church seeking assistance. Mostly the man was looking for work. He had many skills and was willing to learn new ones if he

needed to. They didn't have a phone, they couldn't pay for one, so it's hard for employers to contact them. I said I would keep my ears open but at this time I don't have a place to send him for a job.

I could and you probably can also, list a great deal more observations about what it's like in the work world today. Many of these observations would no doubt reflect the struggles and anxiety of people's work lives today.

While people of faith and members of churches can at times work hard to escape reality, the greatest gift we can offer in these times is to show and speak of what our God offers in a time such as this.

The first thing that God proclaims is the value and dignity of every person. Some of the most disabling dimensions of being unable to provide for oneself and family are the feelings of failure and the loss of self-worth. As people of faith we affirm with God in Christ that people are more than what they/we produce. We are children of God, loved and valued simply because we live, and our circumstances cannot diminish or enlarge this reality. In our gospel passage for today Jesus speaks of himself as a servant. In doing so he takes on the mantle of what the world sees as lowly and even worthless person and proclaims the dignity that comes from being loved regardless of his position.

The second proclamation we make as people of faith on this Labor Day is well put by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians. He writes "From Christ the whole body, the human community, is joined and held together by every supporting ligament, and grows and is built up in love, each part doing its work."

Like Tom Joad's words to his mother about the strength of being joined together, as God's people we are called to join with our neighbors instead of fearing them, we are called to lift each other up instead of ascribing blame, we are called to recognize that our own wellbeing is bound to the wellbeing of others.

While the current state of employment causes us concern and uncertainty, on this Labor Day Sunday, may we, as people who trust in God, hold fast to the knowledge that we are loved and valued regardless of what we produce in our work, and let us turn toward each other for strength instead of turning from each other in fear or competition. God knows what we need and teaches us that it is in sharing and supporting each other that God provides all that is necessary.