

Love & Laboring

Sermon by Audette Fulbright
Sunday, September 3, 2017
All Souls Church, New York City

Let me begin this sermon with a peek behind the curtain; a glimpse of the work that a minister - especially a settled minister - must do in preparing a sermon, especially in a year like this one. Because it is a mix, and sometimes a mess. You look at a week like this one and say, "how can I not preach to this moment?" I find it hard to imagine you're showing up here this morning and you aren't concerned about what's happening in Houston and Southeast Asia, aren't worried about Hurricane Irma brewing off the coast, or the impact of the chemical fires in Texas or the downright un-American shenanigans that now seem to be a constant on the political scene. There are so many things that happen each week, and for those who are paying the slightest attention, it can be absolutely overwhelming. So we come to church. And your ministers have to decide: what to preach?

As Ferris Bueller said, "life moves pretty fast." Most of us spend our days caught up in the rapid-fire pace of life in an internet age, a world where we are always on call thanks to technology. Not all of us, but most of us. Yet we set aside Sunday morning as a sacred time, a time of fellowship and inspiration. If I, as your minister, preach to the moment week by week, then church becomes one more place where the tide of time sweeps us up and carries us in its current - caught in the speed of the day. This is not what it means to center ourselves in our faith. Church is where we come to find what is steady; what holds us in hard times and that which is our guiding star. It is where we come to practice Love, to practice being the people we most want to be.

That is why as people of faith we follow a quieter calendar in our spiritual lives. It is why we center ourselves in ritual and speak to the larger truths of our human lives. We need a chance to catch our breath, take our eyes off the passing parade, and make time for contemplation. We are here together on the Sunday morning of Labor Day weekend, before we head back upstairs for what many of us think of as our "regular" church year, and on a holiday that has come to mean, to many, the last gasp of summer. I will tell you plainly: Labor Day is one of those remembrances that I take pretty seriously. From child labor laws to the weekend, from occupational safety standards to the 40 hour work week, the hard work and sacrifice of those who organized and pushed and yes, died for those advancements changed all of our lives. Labor Day is a time for remembrance, like Memorial Day, for people who engage the world deeply. These are times to pause and consider what we have inherited and whether we, too, are called to the work.

Perhaps you already know that fifty years ago, nearly a third of U.S. workers were in a union. Today, it is about one in ten. We are experiencing some signs of re-emergence in worker organizing -- the current Fight for Fifteen is a great example. And don't get me wrong -- I would not mind going all in and giving a lecture on the history and future of unions, and why we should organize. I will cut to the chase: we should, and even if you do not personally "labor," there is a host of reasons it should matter to you. Because this is a time to talk about faith, and I am not

lecturing, I am sharing a sermon; I want to invite you onto the balcony with me to take a look at some roots and what has grown from them.

In 2015, the Economic Opportunity Institute issued an interesting report. Titled “X Marks the Spot,” it showed, with plenty of data, the point in the mid-1970s when, after years of mirrored growth in productivity and wages after the Second World War, these two indices suddenly separated, and wages declined slightly, and then have literally remained nearly flat while productivity has grown exponentially. Since you are not looking at the graph, what that means is that something happened in the mid-1970s that decoupled productivity and wage growth. Workers stopped having a share in the bounty they were aggressively providing.

What happened? Here is what the Economic Opportunity Institute reported:

It was not the oil shock. Not interest rates. Not the Fed, or monetary policy. Not robots, or the decline of the Soviet Union, or globalization, or the internet.

The sharp break in the mid-70's marks a shift in our country's values. Our moral, social, political and economic values changed in the mid-70's. ...The Depression and World War II defined that generation's collective identity. Our national heroes were the millions of workers, soldiers, families and communities who sacrificed. We owed a national debt to those who had saved Democracy and restored prosperity. The New Deal policies reflected that national purpose, honoring a social safety net, increasing bargaining power for workers and bringing public interest into balance with corporate power. ...The sudden change in the mid-70's was not economic. First it was moral, then social, then political,... then economic.

In the mid-70's, we traded in our post-World War II social contract for a new one, where “greed is good.” In the new moral narrative I can succeed at your expense. I will take a bigger piece of a smaller pie. Our new heroes are billionaires, hedge fund managers, and CEO's. (<http://www.eoionline.org/blog/x-marks-the-spot-where-inequality-took-root-dig-here/>)

Some of you may be billionaires, hedge fund managers, or CEOs, and I hope and trust you are worthy of being someone's hero. The point here is that our *morality* changed and everything else followed. What we, as a society, held as worthy and of value changed, and it has had an escalating effect.

This seems significant to talk about in a week when megachurch pastor and “prosperity gospel” preacher Joel Osteen came under heavy criticism for not immediately offering his huge, and dry, church as a safe harbor for those needing shelter from the literal storm. He then passed a plate among the folks sheltering with him, once he did open his doors.

The value of hard work. The concept of sacrifice. The notion of sharing. The simple idea that “enough is enough.” Not in the “fed up with things” way we use it now, but that enough is actually enough...as when Mary Poppins reminded us that, “enough is as good as a feast.”

Our Unitarian and Universalist forefather Thomas Starr King said of his congregants, “The Universalists think that God is too good to damn them, and the Unitarians think they are too good for God to damn!” We have always placed great faith in one another. Therefore, a time like Labor Day asks us to consider, are we living faithfully with one another?

Labor issues have, over the last year or so, been heavily filtered through the lens of the “alienated working class” who made their rage known in the last election. This is a false narrative - not because there is not genuine stress and rage at an economy that is not working for most people who work, but because that narrative consistently presented “working people” as a code for “white people who work.” But apparently, it doesn’t go without saying: people who labor cross every part of the spectrum of humanity. People of color labor. Queer people labor. Trans people labor. “Working” is not a white issue, it is a human issue. And given this reality, we Unitarian Universalists, the vanguard of the “religious left,” should be absolute leaders on issues of economic justice, poverty, health and safety, and civil rights everywhere - including the workplace. I am glad that Bishop William Barber is a strong leader for economic justice and Unitarian Universalists all over the country work with him and the organization he leads, “Repairers of the Breach.” When I say we should be leaders, I don’t mean we have to be the center of power or the face of the movement. But it should be a part of our identity. As one of the richest and most highly educated faith communities in the United States, this is an area where we stumble. Not from lack of heart - from a lack of faith development. What does our faith call us to believe about money, power, the shape of a world economy? What *moral* values undergird these beliefs? We need time together to talk about these things.

Let me share a poem with you.

Calling Him Back from Layoff
by Bob Kicok

I called a man today. After he said
hello and I said hello came a pause
during which it would have been
confusing to say hello again so I said
how are you doing and guess what, he said
fine and wondered aloud how I was
and it turns out I’m OK. He
was on the couch watching cars
painted with ads for Budweiser follow cars
painted with ads for Tide around an oval
that’s a metaphor for life because
most of us run out of gas and settle
for getting drunk in the stands
and shouting at someone in a t-shirt
we want kraut on our dog. I said
he could have his job back and during
the pause that followed his whiskers

scrubbed the mouthpiece clean
and his breath passed in and out
in the tidal fashion popular
with mammals until he broke through
with the words *how soon thank you*
ohmyGod which crossed his lips and drove
through the wires on the backs of ions
as one long word as one hard prayer
of relief meant to be heard
by the sky. When he began to cry I tried
with the shape of my silence to say
I understood but each confession
of fear and poverty was more awkward
than what you learn in the shower.
After he hung up I went outside and sat
with one hand in the bower of the other
and thought if I turn my head to the left
it changes the song of the oriole
and if I give a job to one stomach other
forks are naked and if tonight a steak
sizzles in his kitchen do the seven
other people staring at their phones
hear?

At this turn of the wheel, let us pause and give thanks. Give thanks to the hands that gather the sheaves, that bake the loaves, that care for the sick, that build houses, fix toilets, care for children and elders, drive the busses. Let us venerate those who went hungry on picket lines, fought, bled and even died for the dignity of work and the basic idea of a fair wage. Let us be people of faith, who set aside the time for reflection on what "economic justice" might mean to us, and how we live our values in our giving, our buying, or our pursuit of a better life.

We all do better when we all do better. In health, in wealth, in health care or education, in simply being human together - we all do better when we all do better. May we dedicate anew to that great purpose.

Amen.