

Spirituality of Work

Shared at Shadow Rock United Church of Christ

August 31, 2008

Rev. Ken Heintzelman

'For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ²After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. ³When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; ⁴and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. ⁵When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. ⁶And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" ⁷They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard." ⁸When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first." ⁹When those hired about five o'clock came; each of them received the usual daily wage. ¹⁰Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. ¹¹And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹²saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." ¹³But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?" ¹⁴Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" ¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'

Every major faith tradition embraced by working families includes in its teachings the call for fair treatment of working people. From Jeremiah's "Woe to him...who makes his neighbor serve him for nothing, and does not give him his wages," to Timothy's admonition that the rich "are to do good, to be rich in good deeds, liberal and generous," to the Prophet Muhammad's "When you hire, compensate the workers and treat them fairly," our holy writings are rich in guidance for behavior toward workers.

The commitment to workplace justice is a natural and historic common ground for religious communities and I am proud that one of our covenantal partners is Rev. Liana Rowe and her work with Interfaith Worker Justice. To speak to the need for such justice work let me use a paragraph from Ched Meyer's article titled, "Sabbath Economics".

Today the wealthiest 20% of the world's population receives almost 83% of the world's income, while the poorest 20% receive less than 2%! Collins and Veskel (2000), in their concise primer on economic disparity in the U.S. today, tell us that in 1965 the average U.S. worker made \$7.52 per hour, while the person running the company made \$330.38 per hour. Today, the average worker makes \$7.39 per hour, the average CEO \$1,566.68 per hour - 212 times more! This is not trickle down economics. This is "trickle up" economics: the transfer of wealth from the increasingly poor to the increasingly rich. This is not the economics of God.

This parable of the generous landowner has meaning which can be traced all the way back to the Creation Story of Genesis and the Jubilee Traditions of Ancient Israel. The Jubilee tradition would include such radical ideas as leaving the fields fallow every seventh year, forgiving all debt, and reverting all property gained by debt collection back to the original families. This tradition is part of what made Jesus so radical as Jesus implemented the spirit of the Jubilee tradition in his own ministry. Today I will not go into this so much but I did think it was important to mention. Moving on we will focus on the Creation Story and its implications for worker justice and a spirituality of work.

The creation story is not a timeline or historical or scientific account of the beginning of the world. It contains some ancient wisdom about what it means to live in the right relationship with God, each other, and creation. Some of the ancient wisdom gives us insight into spirituality, justice, work, and grace. The story assumes an order to creation which does not separate justice, work, and grace but rather it binds these things together to create a “shalom”-ic whole.

One of these insights from the very beginning is that God works six days and rests on the seventh day. This by itself is often taken as a model for our own work lives, that is, we work hard and then we have earned a rest. We think if it is good enough for God, then it must be good enough for me. This puts us in some ways on the same level as God as co-creators. However, there is a deeper wisdom at work here. Human beings are created on the sixth day and the very next activity humans involve themselves in is a Sabbath, that is, resting in God. It is right for human beings to rest first in God before working as co-creators. It is resting in God, observing the Sabbath first, that helps us to arrange our priorities in accordance to God’s created order and intentions. We need to orient ourselves first before we jump into the work.

This rings as true to me because I need a spiritual correction to my own views about work. I look at my own work life and my tendency to fall into the notion that I have produced and created so much by my own effort. It is easy for me to forget how many other people and how much of the natural world I depend on in order to do my work. This spiritual truth from the Creation myth helps me to resist the theology of meritocracy which is expressed in such sayings as “God only helps those who help themselves”. Too often such thinking allows us to puff up with pride and/or justify not doing a good work for the poor.

To go beyond a critique of myself let us not forget or repeat the times in history when people in power used religion to justify unfair labor treatment of women, children, and men. The most heinous example being the use of religion to justify slavery and all the wealth gained and hoarded by such justification. While religion has been used this way and the institution of the Church has far too often approved a spirituality of work can spring out of the creation story and as such our orientation to work can be shaped by several ideas.

- 1.) As important and meaningful as our work is we are a part of a larger work of God who is the source of all life and good things.
- 2.) There is honor in all work and at the end of a project or a work day we should be able to look at what we have accomplished and join a spirituality of work which says, “It is good!” However, being able to say that at the end of a day depends not only on the mind and heart we bring to it but it is also dependent upon the employer to provide a fair and livable wage.
- 3.) The Creation Myth suggests that there is a life giving order to things and to operate contrary to this is to live in the ways of death. For example, the Creation Story assumes abundance in the natural world. When we begin to order our political and economic life as if we live in scarcity, then we set into motion our greatest human capacities for death and the diminishing of every life, including the people who economically benefit from unjust laws. Peg reminded me of a bit of Cherokee wisdom. There are two mind sets that are the bane of human kind—Belief that there is scarcity in creation and the belief that anything or anyone is above or below anything or anyone else in creation.

I remember reading the Sunday comic “The Wizard of Id”. A young person asked the wizard, “What is the Golden Rule?” The wizard in his usual cynical mood answered, “Those who have the gold make the rules!”

A spirituality of work, informed by our faith tradition, sets up a very different economic system from what is usually making the world turn. This is what is happening in the parable. The parable is assuming a spirituality of work which is in line with the Creation Story and the Jubilee tradition. In general, the function of a parable is to orient, disorient, and re-orient people from the ways of the world to the ways of God. This happens and it is most powerful and disturbing when the parable orients, disorients and re-orientes our hearts and minds with our wallets and bank accounts.

In the parable everybody gets paid the same. The ones who worked the longest get paid what was agreed upon and the ones who only worked a small portion of the day get paid a whole day’s wage as well. The wage that everyone gets is the wage necessary to meet the daily needs of a family; not too much and not too little. It is their daily bread. No one is under paid.

The problem is that some of the workers thought others were over paid. Fair is fair but the parable is not about what is fair. The parable is about what is needed and the landowner being more than fair. The landowner is generous because he is not paying out of his belief and fear of scarcity, but out of his conviction of God’s abundance.

Now there are clever and worldly ways we try to think about this kind of thing.

There is a commercial about peanut butter where a mother is supervising the making and sharing of a peanut butter sandwich. After the peanut butter is spread on the bread she gives the older child the knife and tells him to cut the sandwich, and when he cuts the sandwich he should remember that his younger brother will get to choose the first piece. So, the older brother makes sure that the sandwich is cut fairly and equally. Fair is fair but God is about generosity and abundance.

John Rawls an American philosopher at Harvard wrote a rather large book called A Theory of Justice. The idea was to come up with a society that was most fair to the greatest number of people. He proposed a theoretical process of thinking about this and he invited the reader to follow him through this process in his book. One of the ways to come up with the most fair and most just rules of a society was to encourage people to think about fairness in our institutions and societal systems with out any regard to their own personal biases. Rawls called this the “The Veil of Ignorance”. His ethic depended upon the essential assumption that reasonable people would desire to deliberately “blind” themselves to those rules which would give them unfair advantage. And they would do this because they would also believe that ultimately the good and welfare of a society depended upon the good and welfare of the least fortunate and the most number of people in that society.

In contrast to these “clever” ways the parable is saying that there is more peanut butter and bread than we know what to do with. Secondly, we do not need to blind ourselves to our own good fortune in order to be fair, because we have it in us to see clearly what the needs of people are and give accordingly and lovingly. There are times when human need calls upon us to cut the bread unevenly and give the larger portion away. There are times when people need to be seen and deeply known so we may give what is best and most needed. And there are never enough times when we need to give in order to get outside of ourselves and give the bigger portion of bread so that we may find freedom from our own fear of scarcity.

In a society with so much wealth most of us are in the position of the landowner. Let us at the very least be fair and support the creation of laws and institutions that promote fairness. That is the least we can do. However, the call is to be more than fair. The landowner is our example of justice and the call to justice is a call to generosity.