

Same Bricks

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
September 1, 2024 – Sunday Morning Worship with Communion
Text: Exodus 5:1-9

Some of you have probably noticed that I tend to use photos specific to my morning message on the first page of the Worship Resource. I think it always helps to give people something to look at, however briefly, as they consider the theme of worship and the morning message. Today is no exception. This is a photo of a blast furnace in a steel mill. I chose this quite intentionally as a theme photo for this Sunday of Labor Day Weekend because, in my family, this was our reality. My dad, my brothers and my nephew-in-law all know what it's like to labor in a steel mill, one of the most miserable and dangerous work environments on the planet.

My dad spent 20 years in the mill, working his way up the ladder, while going to night school to get his degree in metallurgical engineering. Eventually he was able to make the jump from the mill into the administrative side of things when he became a technical advisor to steel purchasing customers. He took a sizable pay cut to go from a union position in the mill to the towering office building in downtown Pittsburgh, but he knew he needed to make a change to get off of swing shifts and the brutal physical demands of work in the mill. In spite of his move into the white collar side of the steel business, my dad remained a loyal union man at heart. He knew it was the union that got him a 40 hour work week with paid overtime, good health care benefits, paid vacation and a retirement plan. These benefits carried over even into the white collar world as the union mill contracts always had a ripple effect upwards into the white collar side of the business. In other words, if the union did well in its contract negotiations, everybody else in the company did too.

So, perhaps you can see why for me Labor Day always brings my thoughts to steel mills. They populated my childhood in too many ways to count. And yet, clearly, there are so many other ways in which people labor to make a living, to provide for their families. Nursing, teaching, government workers, independent business owners, retail workers, food industry workers, hospitality industry workers and so on, and so on. When you stop to think about it, the number of workers at every level it takes to keep our economy running is almost incomprehensible even as it is often invisible. We should never forget that every one of those jobs is held by a person, a real life person who is already a beloved child of God. This, dear ones, is what we are invited to stop and reflect on during the Labor Day weekend. All those millions of people here in our own country whose efforts, simple and complex, keep the wheels of our economy turning – that’s who we’re supposed to stop and think about, and thank profoundly for all their efforts. Thus, it’s no exaggeration to think of it as thanking ourselves, since most of us here have been a part of the working world at some point in our lives. Maybe we’re retired now but being retired means you did work long enough and hard enough TO retire. All this effort deserves its own holiday for sure. So, dear ones, Happy Labor Day to us!

You might be thinking by this point, what does all this have to do with faith, with my relationship with God, with Jesus. Good question to which I would answer everything. Economic justice for all is the core of the biblical message, albeit one that is all too frequently overlooked or even shoved aside by folks who want to emphasize God as a stern judge far away in heaven and Jesus as divine, destined only to die for the redemption of the sins of all mankind. The simple truth is that the scriptures, Old and New Testament, are filled with stories which illustrate that God has always cared about the totality of the well-being of God’s people, including the economic justice that too

often eludes the vast majority of people. One of the earliest of these stories in Scripture is the one we heard read this morning. This story, which is part of the much larger story of Moses and Aaron being sent by God to free the Hebrew slaves in Egypt, is too often skipped over because we are always in such a hurry to jump to the drama of the 10 plagues and the resulting harrowing escape across the parted Red Sea. I mean, who doesn't like hearing about bloody rivers and raining frogs?

The thing is though that, when we focus on these unquestionably dramatic scenes of this foundational story of our faith, we forget that, at its core, this story is about economic justice for God's people. We forget that the Hebrews came to Egypt not as slaves but as invited guests 400 years before this story, brought there through the efforts of Joseph, Jacob's youngest son. Joseph himself had been sold into captivity by his jealous older brothers. Over many years Joseph became a favored advisor to the Pharaoh despite being a slave and when famine overcame the entire region, Joseph was able to bring his family to Egypt which had plenty of food to share so that all could survive the disaster. In the ensuing centuries the Hebrews thrived becoming important workers and contributors to the well-being of Egypt. In fact, they became so numerous that the Egyptians, now under a different ruling dynasty, became afraid they would exert their power of numbers to destroy Egypt. So they were enslaved. They adjusted to this new reality, even as conditions worsened from generation to generation. They cried aloud to God to be saved and God finally provided an answer to their cries in the form of Moses and Aaron, his brother.

So, that brings us to the point of today's story, which is indeed a story about economic justice. Again, this is one of those stories we think we know, but we really don't because we have a tendency to gloss over important details. For example, at this first meeting

between Moses, Aaron and Pharaoh, Moses does not ask for the Hebrews to be free so they can leave Egypt. No. He asks for them to be given three days off so they could travel into the wilderness to “sacrifice to the Lord our God.” Otherwise, Moses says, “God will fall upon us with pestilence and sword.” Did you pick up on that? Moses is only asking for the Hebrew slaves to be given three days off to observe a religious ritual far from the overshadowing Egyptian temples to foreign gods. And Pharaoh says, NO. “Moses and Aaron, why are you taking the people away from their work? ... Now they are more numerous than the people of the land and yet you want them to stop working!” Truth here. The Hebrews are more numerous than the Egyptians – Pharaoh admits it. Apparently if the Hebrews stop working for even three days, everything in Egyptian life will grind to a halt and that just cannot happen. So Pharaoh says NO!

But he doesn't just say no. He decides to teach the Hebrews – and Moses and Aaron – a lesson for even asking for time off. He orders the overseers to take away the straw the slaves use to make the bricks Egypt needs for its never ending quest to build temples and tombs, palaces and houses, marketplaces and roads. The Egyptian need for bricks was insatiable, so much so that the thought of stopping production for even three days, was frightening. But, not having straw to help the bricks form quickly would slow down production of those bricks. No matter, thought Pharaoh. Just require the same amount of bricks to be made and it will all work out okay. They'll just have to work harder and longer to achieve the same ends. Serves them right for asking for something as ridiculous as time off. He says of the Hebrew slaves, “they are lazy; that is why they cry, ‘Let us go and offer sacrifice to our God.’ Let heavier work be laid on them; then they will labor at it and pay no attention to deceptive words.”

Same bricks. The means of producing the bricks was changed to become more difficult on purpose to punish the Hebrew slaves for

being “lazy,” for thinking time off was something they deserved. Same bricks, different rules. Same bricks even as work was intentionally made more difficult. This was Pharoah’s answer to a perfectly reasonable request for a little time off. Remember that in this first encounter, Moses and Aaron said nothing about freeing the Hebrew slaves to leave permanently. He just asked that they be given a little time off to go into the wilderness and get re-acquainted with God. Just a little thing really. And Pharoah said no and punished them just for asking. So, on this Labor Day Weekend, how familiar does this story sound?

Very familiar, I’m afraid. Workers of every type have always been at the mercy of unscrupulous bosses and immoral companies. Even as we reflect on this topic this weekend, two vital community hospitals in Massachusetts are closing, throwing hundreds out of work and leaving thousands without access to health care. Why? Because venture capitalists were allowed to purchase a chain of hospitals which they then gutted for profits to such an extent that the hospitals were forced into bankruptcy. Everybody lost in this situation – except that is for the half dozen partners in the venture capital firm behind this debacle. They’ll be just fine – well, until Massachusetts catches up with them. But that won’t be easy. In the meantime, all those highly skilled folks – doctors, nurses, med techs, CNA’s, radiology techs, pharmacy techs, billing office folks – all of them are now without a paycheck. Same bricks were their downfall as profits for shareholders were more important than anything – ANYTHING – else. And let’s not ever forget that these two hospitals are in rural areas. Who knows how many will die when their only option for emergency health care goes away. Sadly, dear ones, this is not an isolated instance. You know this. Migrant farm workers, chicken and meat processing plant workers, manufacturing facilities who maximize profit by cutting corners in every possible way including not

only worker pay but safety measures as well. The same bricks mentality is everywhere. The thinking process that says workers, especially if they are immigrants, are “just lazy” remains the default position of far too many of our fellow citizens these days.

So, what are we supposed to do about it? What is God looking for from us as we contemplate these same bricks realities on this Labor Day Weekend? Well, I see two possible avenues of response for us to take – one micro meaning more immediate and personal and the other more macro having a wider impact on a bigger segment of society. Our micro response could be as simple as patronizing small local businesses whose owners are providing viable alternatives to the big, faceless corporations behind to many of the big box stores and online shopping services like Amazon we tend to turn to so easily. Put another way, think Martin House Books instead of Amazon. Think Stonington Gardens instead of Home Depot for fall gardening. Think Stick and Finn for fancy coffee instead of Starbucks. I’m sure you can continue to populate this list for yourselves! Another micro response is to just go out of your way to be kind to folks working in retail these days. Tip well in restaurants, in cash if at all possible. Smile frequently especially when the service is not up to par because the place is understaffed. Again, you know what to do to show local folks working hard that you see them, that you appreciate their efforts in the midst of tough working conditions. And on a macro level, just one word. Vote. Learn all you can about every candidate running and then show up on election day and vote for the candidates for each office who you believe understand who benefits from the economy as it now runs. Your voice. Your choice. Your vote. No sitting it out this year.

So, dear ones, as you leave here to go out and enjoy the rest of this, the last long holiday weekend of the summer, I hope you will think about all the workers whose lives touch yours. Perhaps they’re family members or maybe they’re the folks you encounter when you

pick up some groceries on the way home or go out for lunch. And as you encounter them, make the effort to see, truly see, each and every one of them as the beloved child of God they are. Just like you. Amen.