

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, 405 Washington Ave. Albany, NY 12206

11.25.12 Sermon: “By the Sweat of their Brows”

Presenter: Dave Weissbard

[Thanksgiving]

We have just passed Thanksgiving, a time when we are charged with acknowledging that we are not self-sufficient individuals- we are the beneficiaries of much that we did not ourselves create. As I prepared a version of this morning’s sermon for the congregation in Central Square back on Labor Day, I felt increasingly guilty that I was addressing a subject to which I had paid far too little attention during my fulltime ministry. I believe the issue it addresses is central to our Unitarian Universalist principles, and it addresses one of our failures to appreciate, which is why I decided to share it with you it this morning.

[work]

In truth, we are somewhat ambivalent about work and, therefore, those who labor. One of the central myths of our culture says that humans were given a perfect garden in which to live with no responsibilities save one: not to eat fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But, according to the myth, they did eat thereof, and at that point, humanity was cursed with having to work for food by the “sweat of our brow” until we die.

It used to be that people worked so they could reach the point where they could “retire” – the pinnacle was no longer having to bear the curse of work. For an increasing number of Americans, retirement has become a myth.

As far back as we know, human societies were divided into classes. Often there were holy ones, a priestly class, at the top with a nobility just a step below – neither of which classes had to sweat in order to live well. Below, there were the commoners, (peasants and slaves) who did the labor and the sweating. Labor was not honored. Those who sweat were viewed as lesser beings.

In time, as capitalism developed, a middle class emerged between the privileged above and the peasants below. The middle class functioned as entrepreneurs – the organizers of commerce, the managerial or merchant class. For them, the acquisition of money bestowed a measure of power and status that separated them from the commoners, although some commoners could acquire status for their craftsmanship.

With the coming of the Industrial Revolution, as craftsmanship was overshadowed by machines, the industrialists tended to view the proletariat, those who staffed the factories, almost as part of the machines – a faceless mass – as less than fully human. They were worked until they dropped with as little reward as possible for their labor, and were readily replaced by other cogs for the machines when they broke

down. It mattered little or not at all if they were injured or hungry. They were a commodity, unworthy of concern.

It is a central tenet of Unitarian Universalism that there is within every person, that which is of worth and is deserving of dignity. History tells us that people often respond to that spark within them and demand recognition, sometimes with violence.

[class warfare?]

The oppression of one group by another is commonly accepted as the way things are done – the status quo. It only becomes a "problem" when someone tries to change the status quo. One class of people can dominate, exploit, oppress another group for the power group's economic gain, and that is what history consistently records. It is only at the point when the exploited group objects that the relationship is termed "class warfare," and it is the supporters of the exploited, those who challenge the status quo, who are charged with causing that war. Holding slaves is not considered violent -- freeing slaves is – by the slaveholders.

If people need work in order to provide for the needs of their families, and if there are people with the resources to provide or deny the opportunity to work, the provider has power – especially if there are others also looking for work. If there is a shortage of labor, the worm turns somewhat, but generally the supply of labor is greater than the demand, hence the power of the employers – unless, the laborers are able to organize. If they can agree not to let employers play them against one another, they suddenly develop a measure of power. That is what unions are about: the downtrodden, the exploited, uniting to demand humane treatment, which is more than just dollars.

The founding constitution of the American Federation of Labor in 1886 observed:

A struggle is going on in all nations of the civilized world between the oppressors and the oppressed of all countries, a struggle between the capitalists and the laborers, which grows in intensity from year to year, and will work disastrous results to the toiling millions if they are not combined for mutual protection and benefit.

The reality is that capital and labor are mutually dependent, neither can succeed without the other, but they do not have equal power. There are more laborers than employers, and their work is essential, but if they can be prevented from uniting and recognizing their power, they can be, and have been played against one another and exploited. The old cliché is that the working class is a slumbering giant. It benefits capital's bottom line to keep the giant asleep – to keep its parts isolated so its profits can be maximized.

[protecting privilege]

The history of labor in America is not a straight line. From time to time, there have been groups of laborers who have united, and there have been times when those groups united for real power, but the government has commonly used its power and authority to protect capital, those in control. The government has commonly looked the other way when force has been used by employers to check the power of labor. Strikes and boycotts are the non-violent means of exercising labor's power, but they have often been ruled illegal by the courts. [This week, Walmart went to court to try to prevent the Black Friday strike by some of its workers.]

We were all taught in school about the egalitarian commitment of the founders of our nation, but there is abundant evidence that this is largely a myth that has blurred our perceptions of reality and inhibited our will to create actual justice. Our revolution was fought not so much for political freedom as for the freedom of the wealthy to engage in less restrictive trade than the powerful in the mother country permitted. That's why only about a third of the colonists supported the revolution – a third opposed it and the other third didn't really care, because they believed there was not much in it for them – and they were largely correct. The Continental Congress immediately engaged in protecting the property of the wealthy, lest any should think there was a true revolution going on here.

Listen to what Alexander Hamilton said:

All communities divide themselves into the few and the many. The first are the rich and wellborn, the other the mass of the people. The voice of the people has said to be the voice of God; and however generally this maxim has been quoted and believed, it is not true in fact. The people are turbulent and changing; they seldom judge or determine right. Give therefore to the first class a distinct permanent chair in the government . . . Can a democratic assembly who annually resolve in the mass of the people be supposed steadily to pursue the public good? [Hamilton didn't mention the number 47%, but he might well have: his philosophy lives!]

From the beginning, the laws that have been passed by our Congresses have been skewed heavily in favor of keeping those with wealth, wealthy. They paid good money for those legislators and it was agreed they deserved to be taken care of by them. The force of the government has most often been actively utilized in support of the wealthy in preference to the working class.

We were taught in school, and we are propagandized still, that ours is a classless society, unlike the European nations. The occasional successes by common people who have won the lottery or happened to create a great invention, have been held up as proof of the meritocratic pudding. The constancy of our American wealthy class takes no back seat to the noble families of any old world nation, particularly in this day. The present gap between the 1% and the rest of us in America far exceeds that elsewhere in the developed world, and that gap is increasing daily. Recent studies reveal that America has less class mobility than residents of "Canada, Australia, the Nordic nations

and, to a lesser extent, Germany and France. While 42% of American men with fathers in the bottom fifth of the earning curve remain there, only a quarter of Danes and Swedes and only 30% of Britons do.”

[was Marx wrong?]

Capitalists prematurely celebrated the defeat of Marxism. The Soviet Union had no more relationship to the teachings of Karl Marx than the televangelists of the right have to the teachings of Jesus.

Marx was a romantic. His timetable was off, but his predictions are coming true in present day America. Marx did not appreciate how flexible capitalists could be for a time to stave off the threat of Socialism. He knew how American capitalists had been able to use physical intimidation and even murder to keep labor from organizing. He did not appreciate how an interlude of the 40 hour week and health care and retirement systems could and would be used by Franklin Roosevelt to undercut Socialism. Marx was right, however, in his belief that the unrelenting greed of capitalism would lead to an ever increasing concentration of wealth. He never could have dreamed of 1% of the population owning 42.7% of all assets with the bottom 40% having virtually no wealth at all – many living with net debt.

[the rise and fall of organized labor]

The 20th century saw the rise and the fall of organized labor. Working people, who had been viewed by capitalists as simply an expendable commodity, did organize sufficiently to become acknowledged as a resource, for a time, and to use the power of that position to gain benefits.

The economic prosperity of the 1920's proved to be a challenge to the organization of labor until it all fell apart in 1929. Unemployment in the Great Depression reached 25%! As always, it was those at the bottom who suffered the most. Desperate people began to look toward Europe where Communists were successfully organizing laborers and demanding economic justice. There was real concern that American could turn in the same direction. Enter FDR. Three months after his inauguration, the Congress passed his National Industrial Recovery Act which gave workers the right to organize, established a minimum wage and maximum hours. Labor took advantage of the opportunity and organized. The Second World War strengthened the economy and union membership. By 1950, almost a third of American laborers were members of unions. The wealthy continued to do well, but the facts show that labor was doing well, too. But it did not last.

There was a shift from corporate attempts to balance the interests of employees, shareholders and the community to what has become an almost exclusive emphasis on maximizing shareholder and executive wealth. Management was advised by firms like Bain Capital that the quarterly report could be improved by laying off American workers and outsourcing jobs to where labor was cheap.

Who would have guessed fifty years ago that companies would, in spite of increased productivity by workers, decide to reduce wages, cut back on health care, and renege on pension guarantees in order to increase the profits of management and stockholders -- and that workers would put up with it? The demise of organized labor is symbolized by Reagan's firing of the Air Traffic Controllers and the destruction of their union, but that was more a symbol than a cause. There were several contributing factors.

One was that labor leaders had come to identify more with the managerial class than with labor -- some knew and cared more about paté and country club membership than about the lives of their members.

The coup de grace for organized labor came about when corporations began to say, "Go ahead and strike. We'll just close this plant and build one in a third world country." Cities and states gave incredible concessions [welfare] to industries that subsequently thumbed their noses and walked away. And our government has not only permitted but provided tax breaks to American industries for opening foreign plants, which take jobs from American workers.

The development of the "global economy" contributed to the expansion of the wealth of the wealthy, and the diminished economic capacity of the working class in America. The European nations, or, more accurately, their wealthy classes grew wealthier during the colonial era by exploiting the resources and labor of their colonies, but what they did "ain't nothin'" in comparison to what is happening in the 21st century as American businesses desert our workers to exploit cheap labor. [This is a complicated subject because America does not exist in a bubble. Foreign workers do deserve decent jobs, but at present many of them are being exploited to the benefit of American industries.] Today, many union members are public employees, and their unions are under attack. And then the 1% wonder why American consumers aren't buying more.

I am not, for a moment, asserting the purity of organized labor. Who would have guessed in the early part of the twentieth century that so called "labor leaders" would come to live in the same neighborhoods as CEO's and be members of the same country clubs? Who can deny that there have been criminals involved in the management of some unions, exploiting their own members? Who can deny that some unions have focused too narrowly on the short run, being willing to sacrifice the goose for the golden egg? Who can forget the railroad firemen and brakemen whose jobs were irrelevant but protected? But who can deny that the decline of unions, when graphed, is parallel to the obscene increase in the super-wealth of the 1% and the decline in the well being of the families of labor and the middle class? Why is it that we are reminded so often of the failings of unions and not of their successes? We forget the source of the 40-hour week, the concept of weekends, the end of child labor, and the creation of safety standards to protect workers. Might the corporate ownership of the media have something to do with our denigration of unions?

Most of the media attribute the death of the Twinkie to union contracts, which is a gross distortion. Management has been taking huge raises as bakeries and distribution systems deteriorated. AFofL-CIO President Rich Trumпка pointed out:

What's happening with Hostess Brands is a microcosm of what's wrong with America, as Bain-style Wall Street vultures make themselves rich by making America poor. Crony capitalism and consistently poor management drove Hostess into the ground, but its workers are paying the price. These workers, who consistently make great products Americans love and have offered multiple concessions, want their company to succeed. They have bravely taken a stand against the corporate race-to-the-bottom. And now they and their communities are suffering the tragedy of a needless layoff. This is wrong. It has to stop. It's wrecking America.

[the concentration of capital]

As one looks at the growing gap in the United States between the 1% and the rest of us, at the growing disdain for the rights of workers, it seems as if we are moving back in history. Productivity is up but wages are down; benefits and security are being lost.

The propagandists tell us that we all have a stake in the success of Wall Street - that big lie is repeated again and again. While it is true that more than 51 million people own some stock, according to former Labor Secretary Robert Reich, 90% of the value in the stock market is owned by 10% of the people.

The Biblical Book of Deuteronomy says, "The poor will be with us always." There will always be some who have more and some who have less. The problem is how many have how much less? Is there a point at which the imbalance becomes critical?

What does it mean when people who work hard for forty hours a week – or more – still do not have the means to provide adequately for their families -- to live with respect? What does it mean when investors not only want a profit, but want more profit all the time from the same investment? Is it the business of government to protect privilege, or is it to be sure that all have sufficient resources with which to live securely with food, shelter, health care, and opportunity?

[non-partisan]

This is truly not a partisan issue. While the only time there was silence in the hall at the Republican Convention last summer was when Mitt Romney alleged his commitment to "a United America [which] will care for the poor and the sick, will honor and respect the elderly, and will give a helping hand to those in need." Sudden dead silence. That was not appropriate Republican rhetoric which instead repeatedly depicted President Obama as a red flag waving, foreign born Socialist whose goal it is to destroy our nation.

There was, of course a lot of talk about economic justice at the Democratic convention, but please remember that the 1% profited more in the last 4 years under Obama than they did in Bush's 8! While the Democrats' rhetoric is more justice oriented, their actions on behalf of the 1% over time can hardly be differentiated from those of the Republicans. The Democrats are as beholden to the real power of the 1% as are the Republicans – their obligation to the labor movement which supports them is only rhetorical. "We feel your pain, but...."

To be responsible citizens, we need to ask ourselves more than just on Thanksgiving or Labor Day, what we have done, what we have failed to do, and most importantly what more we can do to make this world a place of justice for all people.

No one wins when there is warfare among classes, but we need to understand that war is going on when one group of people is quietly but consistently exploited by another and left in hopelessness. It is hopelessness – or being on the verge of it – it is a conspicuous gap between the lifestyles of the powerful and the powerless and a careless disregard for the well-being of the powerless -- which historically leads to revolution, and revolution rarely has the hoped-for outcome.

[*setting the strong in favor of the weak*]

My ministerial idol, The Rev. Theodore Parker, in 1846, had been called to preach in Boston in a pulpit created for him by a group of prosperous business people. He was not trying to bite the hands that fed him. "Think not I love to speak hard words, and so often," he said. "Say not that I am setting the poor against the rich. It is no such thing. I am trying to set the strong in favor of the weak. I speak for [humanity]." But Parker saw justice for the working class as an essential moral and religious issue:

If the church is in your hands, then make it preach the . . . Truth. . . . The church of America, the church of freedom, of absolute religion, the church of mankind, where Truth, Goodness, Piety form one trinity of beauty, strength and grace – when shall it come? Soon as we will. It is yours to help it come.

Historically, Unitarians and Universalists have tended to come from the relatively privileged class: few of us have concern about the source of our next meals, or our shelter, or even a reasonable level of comfort. As far as I know, few of us can be numbered among the top 10% in wealth, but few are in the bottom 10%. We are, indeed, relatively speaking, strong. We need that strength to challenge the propaganda which we were fed in what we call the educational process, which led us to misunderstand our history. We need that strength to challenge the propaganda with which we are inundated daily by media owned by the privileged and in the business of protecting privilege, media which assure us that this is, for us, the best of all possible worlds – or that it could be bettered only by giving the privileged, the so-called "job creators" more privileges. We need that strength to stand together in support of those who have been denied access to fair rewards for the work in which they have engaged,

who have been denied access to a share of the power of shaping their lives. Standing for justice, standing on the side of love is not an easy path.

[hope?]

I am not without hope. Who would have anticipated the accomplishments of the New Deal which cut the ground out from under the feared rise of Communism in America. The recognition of the legitimate rights of workers to organize, to be taken seriously, to be treated humanely, to be a meaningful partner in the system, led to decades of both prosperity and a significant level of equality in distribution until greed reared its ugly head and those with much demanded even more. And so we have the growing disparity in wealth that incontrovertibly characterizes the last four decades. The numbers do not lie! The incredible imbalance of wealth in America today is like that of a banana republic, and we know how unstable they are.

But we have been here before. Many historians believe that Roosevelt's New Deal rescued our nation from self-destruction when a fairer balance between labor and capital was created. We did it peacefully then – we can do it again. We need to demand that the rhetoric of social justice be manifested in legislation and action that acknowledges the worth and dignity of all, the right to participate in the democratic process, and the goal of peace and justice for all.

There can be no peace without justice. Let us commit ourselves to standing in solidarity with those who labor on our behalf.

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