

“Conflict Resolution”

Romans 13:8-14, Matthew 18:15-20

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Happy Labor Day weekend to all of you. This is a marvelous weekend and quite amazing in its intent – to tell the truth I am amazed that this particular holiday hasn't been renamed or even eliminated.

Labor Day was established to celebrate the common middle class working person. It was created during the industrial era when the vast majority of our working population were blue-collar people and farmers, and to be in these ranks was something to celebrate. At one time we were a nation of people who enjoyed the common life of jobs that could sustain a family, offered dignity and some sense of stability, that were considered the backbone of a healthy economy that people valued. At one time our economic system seemed to work for the good of working people as well as investors and owners, and when too great a disparity of goals emerged there were laws and organizations established to create some balance of power so that no group could exploit another. Many laws have been stripped away, many organizations have been stripped of their power and frankly, we have moved into a new economic world where tax laws, investment systems, global competition, non-industrial employment, population growth and a host of other factors have created a hostile environment for working people.

I remember the first time I heard a person make the connection between the growth of their retirement portfolio with the decline in jobs. They spoke of how the value of company stock goes up when they reduce the company workforce, because labor is regularly the largest overhead cost. Reducing your labor force reduces costs and increases the value of the company stock.

The anti-monopoly laws in our country used to prevent one company's control of a particular market, but they also served to prevent consolidation that reduced the labor force. I remember some twenty years ago when a member of my extended family was working for a large corporation that was being bought out by another large corporation. The corporate boards and CEO's stated that the buyout would not result in job loss, but within a year or two a significant number of the jobs in the company were eliminated.

We live in a time that is hostile toward labor. Labor and the cost of labor is seen as a problem, yet we are doing away with child labor laws, elderly people are being recruited for low paying jobs, people are being induced to cross our southern borders to fill menial

jobs, minimum wage laws are detested, retirement benefits are being dumped and the disparity between the vast working class wages of our country and the accumulated wealth of the incredibly rich is obscenely wide.

High unemployment reduces the ability of the working class to negotiate for a living wage – we have had a sustained high rate of unemployment for several years now. And while our politicians say that job creation is their number one priority, so many of the decisions/laws that they pass create greater hardship for the very people they say they are assisting. Labor is in a precarious situation and all predictions about the future indicate that the situation will not be changing any time soon.

At one time, perhaps it was mostly the time of significant economic expansion, there was at least the notion that supporting working people was vitally important. There was a common agreement that our economy was best when we had a strong middle-class. There was an agreed upon idea that the wellbeing of one's work force was as important as profits. Companies had picnics, gave bonuses, had profit sharing and just did things to show that they valued their employees. While some companies still do these things, it seems they are more and more rare.

Perhaps the most widely agreed upon, or at least publicly backed concept of our day, is our opposition to taxes – not just some kinds of taxes, but taxes at all. We are willing to accumulate greater debt, but we don't think we should pay for it. We are willing to pour money into areas that create great profits for portions of our society, but we are quick to sweep away support for the middle-class and struggling families. It is amazing to me that our greatest public interest is to scream about the travesty of taxes for those who benefit most significantly from our social structures.

Turn with me to our scripture passages for the morning.

Both Paul's letter to the Romans and Jesus' words to the disciples are directed not at the world in general, but to those within the community of faith. They are both passages that assume a common perspective on what it means to be a follower of Jesus and as members of the community of God's people.

Both passages elevate the importance and urgency of living according to God's ways of love. In Romans we hear Paul's words about the nearness of God's day of salvation. Paul's letter to the Romans was written 30 to 35 years after the resurrection of Jesus. There was still a heightened awareness that something new had broken into the world in the person of Jesus, but the breaking in of God's kingdom was clearly not a radical bombardment with

fire and destruction of God's reign. Instead, because of his own personal conversion, Paul knew how it was possible to move from hatred to love, in a short period of time. Paul's urgency was prompted by his desire for others to experience what he did, for their own sake, and for the sake of the world. So he writes: "Let no debt remain outstanding except for the continuing debt to love one another." For those who followed Jesus, the common value was that of loving each other – "love does no harm, so love fulfills the law. In this way the night ends, day dawns and the truth becomes evident."

In our passage from Matthew's gospel Jesus also assumes common spiritual values among God's people.

Today's gospel passage is preceded by the parable of the lost sheep that teaches that foundness is of greater value than lostness. And our passage is followed by the parable of the unforgiving servant that teaches forgiveness of debt to be a grace that needs to be passed around.

Sandwiched in between Jesus' teachings on the value of the lost being found and the forgiveness of debts, is his teaching on the steps a person should take to be reconciled with a brother or sister within the faith community. When there is a common basis, common beliefs and understandings about what is valued, when this common ground is significantly in place then the opportunity for reconciliation of conflicts is more likely to occur in a way that builds relationships and the community.

If foundness is of great value, and if forgiveness and mercy are of great value, then two people can speak one-to-one, face-to-face to each other about a sin, an injustice, a wrong that one person has visited on another. If truth is of great value, then a person and a witness can speak to another person who had spread gossip or said slanderous lies about a person and the one speaking the lies will listen and stop. If respect for another person's property is of great value, then someone who has had something stolen from them can bring a claim to the leaders of the community regarding a person who committed the theft, and the community leaders will find a way for the restoration of property to take place and the offender will need to change before the community will trust them again.

The steps that Jesus offers to resolve conflicts within the community of the faithful, are most possible because of what is held in common among them. Jesus makes it clear that trusting God's ways makes claims on the faithful. To trust in God's ways of truth, love, forgiveness and justice requires that the faithful act in accord with what they/we value, and what we value is held in common, not just personally. The church community has never been a place where everyone believes just what we want to believe, the church is the

community of faith where we proclaim what we trust in together. I don't mean this in a dogmatic sense. We have a phrase in the church that goes: "In essentials unit, in non-essentials diversity, and in all things charity." We are not a legalistic Christian community, but neither are a collection of disconnected believers. We do hold beliefs in common and these common values make demands on our actions.

On this Labor Day Sunday what seems most evident in our society is that a common agreement on what we value has faded, if not disappeared. It also seems that even when we try to say what we value in common, like good jobs, our actions don't follow what we claim is true. If we say good jobs that support families is a value, then this value makes claims on what we do.

Jesus was clear that what precedes specific steps toward reconciliation is the development of common values, common beliefs that will guide us in the most difficult times. People who are fragment, divided, who have little sense of what we hold in common, have little basis for solving conflicts.

One strength that our church, you and I together, can offer our larger society is a clearer understanding of what we value, trust, believe together, and then to say what claims these beliefs make on our lives. In a world that is so divided the gift of Christ's church is to show what faithful unity looks like. On this Labor Day what claims does our belief in a generous God make on how we reach out to struggling households? This question and our answer to it may produce good fruit that can be offered to our larger community and nation.