

## What Are People For?

Micah 4: 1-4; 6: 6-8; James 2: 1-7; 5: 1-6

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, (Sept. 4) 2011

### Labor Day Sermon

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On this Labor Day weekend, I want us to talk briefly about work, about dignity, and about the people, if we're not careful, we take for granted. On Labor Day we honor the laborers.

Work, jobs, employment, unemployment, the economy are all in the news these days. Closer to home, there are some of us looking for jobs, while some of the jobs we have are not very good jobs – we're underpaid, overworked, overlooked, and under-appreciated. Some of us worry almost every day if we'll get a phone call, an email or some sort of notice that our jobs are ending or our employment is terminated. And there are some of us and many of our friends who work not just one, but two or even three jobs in order to make ends meet. I have conversations all the time with people who can't make it or they're just one mess-up, one illness, one car break-down, away from being on the streets.

A run-down apartment can exacerbate a child's asthma, which leads to a call for an ambulance, which generates a medical bill that cannot be paid, which ruins a credit record, which hikes the interest rate on an auto loan, which forces the purchase of an unreliable used car, which jeopardizes a mother's punctuality at work, which limits her promotions and earning capacity, which confines her to poor housing.

Barbara Ehrenreich says some of the hardest-working people are poor people, so don't believe the lies about people being poor because they won't work. In her bestseller, *Nickel and Dimed; On (not) Getting By in America* (2001), she describes how for six months she lived the life of an unskilled but fully employed wage earner.

In Florida she worked as a waitress on the 2:00-10PM shift, then as a house cleaner for Molly Maid. In Maine she worked as a "dietary aide" at a nursing home and as a hotel maid. In Minnesota she clerked at Wal-Mart, the largest private employer in the nation with 825,000 people on the payroll. Ehrenreich lived in budget motels and dangerous trailer parks and sometimes she lived in her car, she ate only what she could afford (which tended to be fast food), she discovered that she needed two unskilled jobs just to squeak by, and overall found herself physically and emotionally drained.

She worked alongside people we pass every day who make our American way of life possible. They clean our office buildings at night, serve us at restaurants, repair our cars, pick, pack, process, and transport our food, work in the warehouses and backrooms making sure we receive this product or another. Even though these people work long and hard, they barely make ends meet, and often they don't. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, "in the median state a minimum wage worker would have to work 89 hours each week to afford a two-bedroom apartment at 30% of his or her income, which is the federal definition of affordable housing."

At the Outlet Mall in San Marcos, where Emily works, there are employees who work at two and three stores trying to get by with families.

These are the people I think about when someone like Michelle Bachmann says that if she were president she'd lower the minimum wage. Lower it to what? It's already impossible to make a living on minimum wage. Here we are still discussing lowering the minimum wage when we should be talking about a living wage for people.

And I'm talking about people classified as employed. What about the jobless? And the homeless? Sometimes I wonder if our attitude toward menial jobs – especially the jobs of taking care of the elderly or taking care of our children or taking care of the land and producing our food – and our rush to mechanization and technology, and our greed that prizes the bottom-line of profit over everything else, and how much we emphasize labor-saving devices, etc. – all the ways we disdain work and the people who do the work – I wonder what are people for? Is the planned obsolescence of human beings our social goal? (see Wendell Berry, *What Are People For?*, p. 125). We care about profit. We care about efficiency. We care about a lot of things. But do we live in a society that cares about people?

Our Scripture readings this morning are simply the tip of a massive iceberg in the Bible about how we treat people who are poor and the problem of wealth. In the Bible, wealth and wealthy people are problems and there is no way around it. In the Bible we love and worship God, and how that love and worship is lived out is how we treat other people.

When we follow Jesus Christ, we follow him in caring for the least of these. We follow Jesus in walking beside the suffering and we learn to be with and listen to those who are impoverished. And if we're walking with Jesus alongside those who labor and suffer and serve, there is hope. Hope for change is possible. With Jesus social justice is possible.

Just this week I was listening to NPR and an interview with Barry Estabrook, author of the new book *Tomatoland: How Modern Agriculture Destroyed Our Most Alluring Fruit*, who described the life of farm workers on Florida's big tomato industrial farms. Almost all of the winter tomatoes we have are from Florida and in order to grow tomatoes in that Florida sand over 180 different chemicals are used: fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides, insecticides, including some of the most toxic and dangerous chemicals available. The farm workers – who are made up of both illegal and legal workers, and who are Anglo, Hispanic, and African-American – are coated with these chemicals out in the fields, resulting in cancer, blindness, birth defects, disfigurement, and other terrible ailments. Child labor and minimum wage laws are flouted, and the most minimal housing standards are not enforced. “Even actual slavery is either tolerated or at best ignored.” Many of the workers are kept chained and locked up at night to keep them from escaping and there are records of workers being shot and killed trying to flee the fields. Law enforcement officials are working hard to stop such things but they run into powerful interests who put up obstacles and powerful and wealthy farms that are able to cover up what's really going on.

This did not happen in the 1800's or 1930's; this is happening today. Partly, it happens because we are living in a time where the powerful and the political spend all their time worrying about giving Wall Street tax breaks or increasing efficiency and profitability, and no time worrying over working and poor people. And we condone it every time we eat Florida winter tomatoes.

I tell this story on this Labor Sunday and I remember Cesar Chavez, who worked to help poor farm workers. He was raised on a farm in Arizona until his family lost the farm to large landowners during the Depression. Chavez became a migrant worker and experienced first-hand the exploitation of farm workers. He

learned that the only way to counter organized power and organized money was with organized people so he led in the founding of the United Farm Workers in 1962.

Chavez was a devout Catholic Christian. He said, “We ask for the presence of the Church with us, beside us, as Christ is with us. We ask the Church to sacrifice with people for social change, for justice, and for the love of brother [and sister]. We don’t ask for words. We ask for deeds. We don’t ask for paternalism. We ask for servanthood.”

When I was an intern for the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission in Dallas in the early 1980’s, one day staff member Weston Ware came into my cubby hole and said, “Come on, come with me.” I asked where we were going and he simply said, “Come on. I want you to meet someone.”

We drove over to East Dallas and into the parking lot of a Winn Dixie supermarket where there were about ten people picketing. We got out and walked over and there was Cesar Chavez. He was a small and humble man, unobtrusive and gentle. After being introduced, I stood there speechless while he and Weston talked about the exploitation of laborers in the California grape fields and the big chain stores like Winn Dixie that did business with the grape growers.

As we left, he shook Weston’s hand and he shook my hand and said, “Si se pueda,” which means, “It is possible” or “yes, it can be done.” I learned later that phrase was his signature phrase. And it has become the signature of the United Farm Workers.

Si se pueda – it is possible. For us who walk with Jesus, it is possible. We live in hope. Amen and amen.