

"Bread and Roses"

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 Psalm 1 Philemon 1:1-21 Luke 14:25-33

To our Trinity friends in Christ, many thanks for inviting our congregation to worship with you this summer on these first Sundays of July, August, and September. We have deeply appreciated your hospitality, kindness, and faithfulness. And it's a pleasure to worship with Rev. Barnett and the Holy Trinity congregation and Praise Band.

For this month, I told Father Darryl that while I would love to hear him preach, I had a Labor Day message that I could share. And you can see now – how things went!

I found it interesting to trace the beginnings of the holiday. In the late 19th century, American labor leader Peter McGuire first proposed the idea of a day between Independence Day and Thanksgiving Day that would honor *labor* in our nation. Labor Day would be marked by a parade followed by a picnic. McGuire suggested that this day be set aside to honor the industrial spirit, quote: "*the great vital force of the nation.*"

Labor Day began as a parade on September 5, 1882 in New York City and two years later became a national holiday. Although we all enjoy the late summer respite Labor Day gives us, none of us needs to be reminded of the central role *work* plays in our lives. And none of us needs to be reminded of the upheaval the pandemic caused in the workplace these past two and a half years as people had to cope with changes and challenges, pains and losses. Some are doing their jobs in new ways. Others changed or quit their jobs in the so-called Great Resignation.

Whether or not the job loss is voluntary or forced upon a worker, with most job losses comes not only a loss of income, but there is a loss of identity. Our work gives us a name such as: teacher, clerk, landscaper, farmer, machinist, minister, nurse, lawyer, office manager, plumber, doctor, homemaker, volunteer.

Furthermore, our work can give us much more than just a name, it can also give us *fulfillment*. Whether income-earning or volunteering, work can be a source of personal pride and satisfaction: a project finished, a product made, a program created, a problem solved, a person helped.

And yet, if we can put aside volunteers – or put them *on the pedestal* where they rightfully belong – and speak strictly now for the employed, we have all come to expect a reasonable compensation for our labors. However, we know all too well that throughout history, working people have not always been treated fairly by their employers. Whether in the mill or mine, factory or field, hospital or nursing home, school or elsewhere, workers yesterday and today have protested injustice: demanding fair compensation and safe working conditions.

Before I tell you about one such incident, I should note that people in both unions and management have exhibited excesses of power: but I would like to highlight a particular struggle for economic justice on this Labor Day Sunday.

One of the most famous, most dramatic, most courageous chapters in American labor history commenced on January 12, 1912 when the textile mill workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts stopped working, and began marching from the mills. Before long, 25,000 workers from 11 mills were striking, stopping production in the largest mills in the world. ***It was reported that not a single wheel turned.***

The primary issue was wages. And the catalyst was when the Massachusetts state legislature passed a law reducing work hours for women and minors from 56 to 54 hours a week. The mill owners took advantage of the new law and cut wages, while at the same time speeding up production.

The government and mill officials took a dim view of the strike. The Mayor of Lawrence said, "***We will either break this strike or break the strikers' heads.***" Said a stockholder, "***The way to settle this strike is to shoot down 40 or 50 of 'em.***"

Some of the strikers and their children were beaten as the children tried to leave Lawrence. But the harassment and violence deployed by the mill owners and city officials failed to break the spirit of the striking workers. The workers remained ***unified, non-violent, and determined.***

As word of the strike got out in the newspapers, people across the country were appalled by the laborers' low wages and the abysmal working conditions of the Lawrence mills.

And 63 days after the strike began, the mill owners – in part responding to the increasing pressure against them – capitulated, and they met the demands of the workers. One of the most fascinating aspects of this historic strike was the fact that the 25,000 striking workers included immigrants from at least ***30 different nations*** who spoke ***40 different languages.***

Many of these people had been bitter enemies in the old world. But now in America, they had united to fight a common enemy. The common enemy was poverty and the indignities that came from working in the mills.

In the words of Joseph Ettor, a strike leader in Lawrence, "Among workers there is only one nationality, one race, one creed."

The strike in Lawrence became known as the "Bread and Roses" Strike. Women went to the streets with banners reading, "***For Bread, and Roses, too.***"

The phrase came from Helen Todd who was a women's suffrage activist. Many suffragists at the time were motivated by women's poor working conditions. They believed that if women could vote, they could conceivably enact change. And you may recall that the 19th amendment – giving women the right to vote – was ratified in 1920, 8 years after the strike.

The rallying cry "***For Bread, and Roses, too***" called for bread for the bodies and stomachs of the women and their children. And the roses were for their souls. The roses symbolized a better, fairer, more humane life filled with art and love and beauty for young and old. Workers deserve bread, but workers also deserve roses.

In 1912, James Oppenheim wrote a poem commemorating the strike. It was later set to music, but the original poem goes like this:

“As we come marching, marching, in the beauty of the day,
 A million darkened kitchens, a thousand mill-lofts gray
 Are touched with all the radiance that a sudden sun discloses,
 For the people hear us singing, "Bread and Roses, Bread and Roses.”

As we come marching, marching, we battle, too, for men –
 For they are women's children and we mother them again.
 Our days shall not be sweated from birth until life closes –
 Hearts starve as well as bodies: Give us Bread, but give us Roses.

As we come marching, marching, unnumbered women dead
 Go crying through our singing – their ancient song of Bread;
 Small art and love and beauty their trudging spirits knew –
 Yes, it is Bread we fight for—but we fight for Roses, too.

As we come marching, marching, we bring the Greater Day –
 The rising of the women means the rising of the race.
 No more the drudge and idler—ten that toil where one reposes –
 But a sharing of life's glories: Bread and Roses, Bread and Roses.”

One line rings particularly true with meaning: “*Hearts starve as well as bodies: give us bread, but give us roses.*”

And so too in our lives, we can hear ourselves *saying*, we can hear ourselves *praying*:
 God give us our daily bread, but give us roses, too.

Give us our daily sustenance, but grant us the rose-like desires of our hearts, which blossom and bloom deep within and whose thorns sometimes pierce us with poignancy.

Give us the rose-like desires of our hearts – the desire for peace of mind, and purity of heart.

The desire for acceptance of who we are without pretenses and pretending.

The desire for inner creativity to find some outer expression.

The desire to give and not just take, from our friends, from our families, from our earth.

The desire to know who we are and what we really need, not what others tell us we need.

The desire for the world to be at peace, and the desire to be at peace when the rest of the world swirls and whirls around us.

The desire to be free from regret, resentment, guilt, illness or injury.

The desire to not just hear music, and see art, and read poetry and literature, and savor nature, but to actually feel and embrace these holy manifestations that take us outside of ourselves, while taking us deep within ourselves at the same time.

The desire for justice in our communities and around the world for people who are poor, disadvantaged, discriminated against, oppressed, beaten down, or deprived of rights for the color of their skin, the religion they profess, the culture they embrace, and the people they choose to love.

Grant us the desire to know that this life does not just end, but is a gate-way to a new beginning, an entrance to eternal life. God, grant us the rose-like desires of our hearts, for as much as we need bread for our stomachs, *we need roses for our souls.*

Today's scriptures show us how to feed our souls.

We feed our souls by *choosing life*. The Book of Deuteronomy says: "Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him."

We feed our souls by *having fruitful faith*. The Psalmist writes: "To be like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither; everything they do shall prosper."

We feed our souls by *showing gratitude and love*. The Apostle Paul writes to Philemon: "I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus."

We feed our souls by *following Christ*. Jesus says in the Gospel of Luke: "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."

Jesus taught us about sacrifice and discipleship. His mission was revealed in these words from the Gospel of John: "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

The sustenance Jesus brings fills not just stomachs, but souls as well.

For Jesus is the life-giving bread: a reality we celebrate and remember whenever we partake of the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper.

And just as the Lawrence strikers became *one nationality, one race, one creed* – so too do we become one people when we partake of the living bread and the ever-flowing cup.

As we gather at the communion table this morning, we are Christians from different traditions. But more so, we are believers bound together as one in faith and love.

We can say together and we can pray to God these words together: *give us bread, but give us roses, too. Amen.*

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