

Only a Debt of Love

Romans 13: 8-14

Labor Day Sunday
September 6, 2020

The Rev. Erica Wimber Avena

Prayer: Forgiving God, as we are reminded of your law of love, your gospel of peace, help us not to measure our own worth against our assessment of others. Someone listening in this online space is ready to forgive, someone listening needs to be forgiven; some of us need to stop our attempts to over-function, others of us need to get up and get motivated to do the things we have been avoiding. As we are separated one from another, remind us again, that we are connected by your own Holy Spirit, help us to welcome that spirit in our lives...

Labor Day weekend for many of us is among the last days to enjoy a few days of summer vacation, a day off from school, a day to look through the Labor Day weekend sales, a day for yourself. Historically it was a day set aside to pay tribute to the contributions and achievements of American workers.

It was first celebrated September 5, 1882 in New York City. The New York Times's article, which appeared the next day, reported that 10,000 people marched "in an orderly and pleasant manner," far fewer than the organizers had predicted would attend. The workers included cigar-makers, dressmakers, printers, shoemakers, bricklayers and other tradespeople. ... they marched from New York's City Hall to a giant community picnic at a park uptown...Because it wasn't yet an official holiday, many of the attendees risked their jobs by participating in the one-day strike. On their signs, they called for "Less Work and More Pay," an eight-hour workday, and a prohibition on the use of convict labor. They were met with cheers. ...at the time many Americans toiled 12 hours a day, seven days a week, often in physically demanding, low-paying jobs. Children worked too, on farms, and in factories and mines. Conditions were often harsh and unsafe.¹

The Labor movement was a popular movement; in retrospect we can look back and say some things are certainly improved, child labor is abolished, public schools are well established, the week-end became a time when many families are able to spend leisure time together, and many of those families began to choose to use part of that time to go together to a house of worship in their communities. Education, health, spiritual life, and family relationships were improved across the board by the Labor movement. A rising tide raises all ships. (One of my favorite expressions.)

If you had been living then, where do you think you might be? Marching and picnicking? Looking out the window of your apartment at the parade? Looking out the window of where you worked in a sweatshop with ambivalence at the people marching past... should you have joined them, how important is it to keep working? There were business owners who made their objections known.

Two decades earlier, President Abraham Lincoln said: Labor is prior to, and independent of, capital. Capital is only the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is the superior of capital, and deserves much the higher consideration.² (x2) So he is valuing the worker more than the financial interests that the worker, any worker including slaves at the time, may produce. The value, the magic, resides with the humans, not in the money.

The manner of your work, your worth, what you owe, and who you owe it to. While these issues govern much of the major decisions in adult lives, these questions are old, and have been turned over and reconsidered it every generation.

The Apostle Paul in Romans and in his other letters has a great deal to say about how you are to interact with your employer and the other authorities in your life. In his day, many Christians found themselves working for pagan employers, and were deeply conflicted about how much support they could give to business interests that were in conflict with their new and hard won faith in Jesus Christ. And to put a fine point on this, most of the early leaders, Peter, Paul, Jesus, ultimately ran afoul of the authorities and died at their hands. The stakes in this conversation were high for them.

In this scripture Paul rolls out the ten commandments and summarizes them, saying "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law." ...There is a Christmas carol which includes the verse "*Truly he taught us to love one another; his law is love and his gospel is peace*" – O Holy Night...

Which is to say, that the choices in any given life may be particular to that life, but there is a guiding principle, which we can use as a lens through which to look at our choices – a law of love. We need to set ourselves up in a position to be able to do that. Forgive someone, withhold a hurtful comment, be clear eyed about what has gone wrong – not to find fault, but to find a way through.

The scriptures, Old and New Testament have a lot to say about debt -- it reflects on how we value one another. In Paul's time debt was only extended to people who needed the money; there was no way to leverage a business, no mortgage deduction, no zero interest car loans, no investment bonds. Anytime someone was borrowing money it was because -- they were short – and the law was that this is no time to take advantage of anyone. Jesus says: *Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.*³ Jesus is concerned for the poor and vulnerable.

We are more inclined to think about reasonable debt ratios; secured verses unsecured debt. And we continue to have a national problem of folks taking on more debt than they can handle; someone who does that has a spiritual problem, in addition to a financial problem...perhaps caused by a health problem, or the need for an education... -- Labor issues going back to the beginning of the labor movement.

There are important national and international questions around debt. There are important personal questions around it. This week, let me encourage you to in the words of Paul, find a way to "owe no one anything, except to love one another..."

It will turn the world upside down. In all the right ways.

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¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/01/us/what-is-labor-day.html>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Labour_movement 1861 (first year of his presidency)

³ Matthew 5:42