

## *Labor Day*

As a congregation, we are doing some intentional anti-racism work. The CDC, our development corporation is working with a group called “Truth and Titus” to help us work through our own beliefs and systems we were raised in and the systems we are living in. Our whole church will soon do the book study on *Stamped from the Beginning – The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* and our youth and children will be studying along side of us using the book *Stamped for Kids, Racism, Antiracism and you*.

The Michigan Conference of the United Methodist Church is now asking its churches and its pastors to report back on the anti-racism work we are doing.

At the beginning of the year, when I knew I was going on a renewal leave, I intentionally put some time away to do a Civil Rights tour of the South to learn more of the awful truth of the history of our country. Another thing that I did was read the book “The 1619 Project.”

In late August of 1619, Africans were brought to this shore, to the coast of Virginia. Africans persevered through the indignities, dehumanization and atrocities of the middle passage. These Africans were sold as involuntary laborers and as indentured servants. This began our country’s unjust labor practices.

Unjust labor conditions continue for many black and brown skinned persons. Today is Labor Sunday. The first Labor Sunday was established in 1909. It was meant to be a day for churches to pray for workers which we did this morning and to raise congregations awareness about unjust labor practices which hopefully I will do in my message. It’s not easy to hear. but sometimes we have to hear the bad news before we hear the good news. So first the bad news.

- Over one quarter of all jobs in the U.S. pay poverty level wages. Forty three percent of Hispanic workers, 36% of black workers and 23% of white workers earned poverty level wages.
- Over 8 in 10 low wage workers do not have a single paid sick day.
- up to two thirds of workers in low wage industries are victims of wage theft. Failure to pay for all hours worked or for overtime are just some examples of the ways employers steal wages.
- The U.S. food system employs 1 out of 7 workers, of the nation’s workforce. Yet, the U.S. food system is the worst employer in the country in terms of wages and working conditions. Food workers have the highest rate of food insecurity, ironically. That is, food workers struggle the most with paying for their food.
- It is very difficult to buy clothes – and especially shoes – that are made under fair, sweat-free conditions and not in a sweatshop.
- Most coffee beans are produced by small countries who grow and harvest their crop, then sell it to a local buyer, a “coyote.” It then passes through the hands of additional middlemen and then reaches huge multinational coffee roasters. Small farmers rarely get fair treatment in a system where all the market power lies with the middlemen and the huge multinational firms. This is why we should use Fair Trade Coffee so that the money will go to the farmers rather than the middlemen and the multinational firms.

- Most of the chocolate we eat involves child labor. There are two countries in Africa that produce 70% of the chocolate and they use child labor. That is why, in our Small World Shop, when it was open, sold Fair trade chocolate because Fair Trade chocolate ensures that child labor was not used in its production.

Most low wage workers are black and brown skinned persons but lets not forget that we follow in the footsteps of a brown skinned carpenter, who, too, was a low wage worker. Jesus and his disciples were low-wage workers. Jesus worked the rough wood, and walked the long and dusty roads and knew the bitter thirst of the poor.

Let's look at what our low wage worker, Jesus is asking of us today in our scripture lesson.

Jesus says in other translations, "if anyone comes to Me, and does not hate their own father and mother, and spouse and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even their own life, they cannot be my disciple."

What is with all the hating, Jesus?

Many people familiar with the Greek have pointed out that the word translated as "hate" in this passage, while strong, does not mean "harbor bitter feelings toward" but something more like "renounce, let go of." Jesus is urging his would-be followers to stop clinging to their family relations.

There is just no way for us to understand how shocking this would sound in first century Palestine. In that culture, your bloodline dictated everything about your place in the society – your status, your wealth, your work your identity, your community of equals, your degree of honor or shame. It designated where you fit into the oppressive systems of the Roman empire.

Like any oppressive system, the Roman empire relied upon everyone to play the part that has been prepared for them – from the destitute sharecroppers who grew the food to the chief priest who profited from collecting outrageous taxes to the puppet king who ruled in Rome's name.

Enslavement in the United States likewise relied on mass "cooperation." The system worked because everyone cooperated with it – enslaved people whose "cooperation" was enforced by violence and threat of death; the overseers who received slightly better treatment in compensation for keeping those enslaved in line; the so-called "free" people who served in the fugitive slave patrol; the mistress of the plantation, who consented to the brutality taking place under her nose and often dealt with it by using opium or retreating to bed with headaches probably induced by vicarious trauma. Even the "master" himself was not completely in control of the system; he operated within a trade network in which his profits depended upon his continued participation in horrific brutality.

Technically, anyone in this system could break rank, but the costs were high and they were highest for those with the least power. This is still true.

Today, Jesus might urge us to "hate" – in other words, let go of, or risk – our place, our role, in maintaining oppressive systems especially when that role benefits us at the expense of others.

This Labor Day weekend is an opportunity to acknowledge the ways in which our work might support mass exploitation of other human people as well as the more-than-human world.

In her article, “The Master’s Mehserle Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” Lynice Pinkard imagines Johannes Mehserle – the police officer who killed unarmed Black man Oscar Grant on January 1, 2009, in Oakland, California – staring at his name on the police report: “Officer Mehserle.” She writes:

Suddenly Johannes Mehserle has truly become Officer Mehserle. The title gives his role the power of the overseer, the privileged servant of the oppressor. In this context his name has become monstrous and unrecognizable. Here we see a colonizer gazing directly at a “mark of power,” something that forces him into the nauseating realm of ambivalence... Officer Mehserle is not used to seeing himself as a servant oppressor – as a cold, white title in hard black print. He is made to realize, however briefly and however subconsciously, that his original desires, as a ‘caring’ public servant will be twisted to serve the requirements of the system.”

She goes on to caution the rest of us against using Mehserle as a scapegoat to avoid our own culpability in the same system: “We servant oppressors have all been thought of and our consent has already been manufactured, whether we consent to use guns or schoolbooks or church bells or television sets or department store mannequins to prop up the system: all of us, rich and poor, gay and straight, progressive or liberal or conservative, are intended to serve an imperial agenda and do the killing in an imperial war.”

In asking us to “hate” our places in an oppressive structure, Jesus is inviting us to subvert those roles. that entails risk – sometimes tremendous risk. Which means we don’t do it alone. We do it in community.

Thank God for those who haven’t given up because the struggle seemed insurmountable. Thank God for the people who continue to show up to city council meetings and town halls and lobbying days to advocate for just policies even when they think their representatives are going to vote the wrong way. Often, things don’t go the way of justice, but sometimes they do, and they certainly wouldn’t have if everyone had stayed home.

This can seem overwhelming, right? And we start to wonder what we can possibly do to make a difference? Certainly we can and must urge lawmakers to raise the minimum wage, further improve workplace safety and provide more equitable health care. But there are individual things we can all do – small gestures that may have enormous impact on the life of a worker.

Be polite. Wait patiently in line at the fast food restaurant. Put your cell phone away and say hello to the cashier at the grocery store. when you are finished with your grocery cart, put it back where it belongs.

When the construction crew, standing in the hot sun, inhaling exhaust fumes all day, has the highway blocked to repair potholes, obey the speed limit and heed the signs. Clean up after yourself in the hotel room. Throw away your popcorn bag after the movie. Say thank you to your waiter when they bring you water. Respect those who serve you. Be polite.

Be mindful. Notice the workers around you who make life what it is. Think of the many ways you benefit from others labors.

Be generous. Tip well. Waiting tables is hard and often thankless work. Ten percent is not enough. I encourage you to tip at least 20%. I heard about a church in South Central Illinois who had met their operating budget by the end of November. The Elders stood up before the church and said, "We have met our budget. We don't need your money."

Yes, that is what those crazy people said. Now to be fair, I need to say that they didn't have a pastor for half of the year – so that helped with budget expenses, but they said, "We don't need your money. So, whatever money you would normally give in December, we want you to give it away to someone who needs it. And then tell us your story." Lots of stories came in.

A favorite though was the \$1000 tip to the Waffle House waitress. If you've ever been to a Waffle house, you know that you pay on your way out. Kind of like Louie's in Eastern Market. The waitress at the Waffle House dropped off the yellow ticket. And this church member stuffed \$1,000 – fifties and hundreds – underneath the yellow ticket. He runs out to his car, so he can watch from his car through the glass window. If you're a waffle house waitress and there is no one there, but the ticket is still there, you've been stiffed.

And he watches. She looks around. She rolls her eyes, and she rips the ticket off of the table and she sees a wad of cash. And she begins to count it. And he sees that she's thinking she is in the middle of a drug deal or a money laundering kind of thing.

So, he gets out of his car and runs in and says, "That's your money. Merry Christmas. God bless." She's crying, He's crying. His story inspired others in the congregation to leave big tips for service industry folks.

We may not be able to tip \$1,000 but we can be generous and tip well. Be polite. Be mindful. Be generous.

It was over 400 years ago, in 1619, that enslaved Africans were brought to this land, facing oppressive, brutal working conditions. I got to thinking that it took 400 years to deliver the people of Israel out of bondage from brutal, oppressive, unjust labor. After 400 years, God delivered the people of Israel out of bondage through God's servant Moses.

I wondered, "God, are you going to deliver this nation from the stranglehold of oppressive and unjust working conditions? After all, its over 400 years now.

And God said, "I don't know. You tell me!"

We are the co-laborers with the Creator of Liberation and Justice. May we work together to create the kindom of God on earth for all people. Amen.