

Workers & Justice: What Would Moses Do?

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*Call it England, call it Spain
Egypt rules with whip and chain
Moses free my people again!
We're all working for Pharaoh

Pharaoh he sits in his tower of steel
Around his feet the princes kneel
Far beneath we shoulder the wheel
We're all working for Pharaoh*
from *Pharaoh*, by Richard Thompson

Ancient Witness: Exodus 5: 1-9

Today I want to talk about working people and their families, justice and our faith. All days are holy, but Labor Day, to me, is especially so.

And so, this is a political sermon, that is, it addresses how we should act collectively as a nation; it addresses policy; it addresses how we should govern ourselves.

And sermons, it seems to me, must be political from time to time. Not partisan, as the IRS would rightly point out, never endorsing a party or a candidate, but definitely political. Because if we say that we love justice, we *have* to be political. You have to be political if you work for justice, for justice is essentially about how a society acts collectively through its laws, rules and policies – how it is organized. Justice is not about individual voluntary altruistic actions; it is systemic.

Actually, *all* sermons are political. All people are, too. They either tacitly support the status quo with their silence or point toward some alternative. I'm reminded by something William Sloane Coffin once said:

An old saying holds that religion and politics don't mix. Probably it was first said by Pharaoh when he turned down Moses' plea to "let my people go." Generally what it means is, "Your religion doesn't mix with my politics."

In Judaism and Christianity we have a rich tradition of prophets confronting political authorities and challenging the power structure to do that right thing. For that is essentially what prophets do. They don't predict the future but call governments – kings, rulers and entire nations – into accountability to God. Usually they speak on behalf of those who have no voice and no power—those people who were being abused, exploited or neglected.

Moses was one such prophet.

The book of Exodus starts out by saying that the people of Israel were immigrants. They traveled to Egypt for a better life, and it says

They multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was full of them (1:7)

This worried the King of Egypt, and so he said to his leaders,

“Come, let us deal shrewdly with them or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.” Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. (1:10-11)

They became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard services in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them. (1:13-14)

And so, as our story goes, God speaks to Moses through a burning bush:

I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt: I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters... I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So I will send you to Pharaoh... (3:7, 9, 10)

And so here is where we pick up the story with our scripture reading today. And part of what I want to point out is that this biblical story about the Israelites in Egypt under Pharaoh is a story about labor organizing and worker justice. Moses was one of the first labor organizers!

And so when Moses and Aaron began organizing the Israelite workers, that is, speaking with a unified voice on their behalf, one of the first demands was for some time off.

Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, “Thus says Our God, the God of Israel: ‘Let my people go so that they might celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness.’” (5:1)

It’s important to have rest from our labors, to have time off to worship, be with family, to be able to relax and enjoy the fruit of one’s labor. Holidays and Sabbaths are a matter of human dignity and wholeness. Organized labor through the generations has fought for holidays, weekends, and a limited number of hours employers can force somebody to work. This is part of an age-old struggle. And so one of the first things that Moses and Aaron asked for from Pharaoh was some time off for a festival.

And what was Pharaoh’s response? He ordered the taskmasters and supervisors:

“You shall no longer give people straw to make bricks, as before... But you shall require of them the same quantity of bricks as they have made previously...” (5:7-8)

And so the response was to increase the work load – do more with less. The response was retribution, a message: you had better keep your mouths shut, learn your place in life. And then Pharaoh does what those of wealth and power often do to those who are poor and struggling. He blames them and says, “*You are lazy. Lazy!*” (5:17)

Dean Snyder at Foundry Methodist Church said:

“Bricks without straw” is the symbol of all the expectations of all the Pharaohs who see workers not as people but as instrumentalities, as tools, as factors in a productivity equation. “Bricks without straw” is the symbol of all of the Pharaoh’s inhuman expectations.

And so Moses and Aaron challenge this cold-hearted perspective. They assert that the Israelite workers are God’s children. They are human beings of inherent dignity, value and worth. As all workers are God’s precious children and not just a cog in the machine.

Now, when we are working for justice it is never easy. We can always expect a backlash. Even those you are working for can turn against you. In our story the Israelite Supervisors found themselves in a tough spot. It says, “they saw that they were in trouble.” (5:19) And so some of the workers didn’t get angry at Pharaoh, they got angry at Moses and Aaron! And they said to Moses, “May Our God look upon you and judge! You have put a sword in their hand to kill us.” (5:21)

Poor Moses! It’s not easy being a labor organizer. It’s not easy doing God’s work for justice. In the struggle for fairness and dignity there inevitably is a backlash and blaming the victims.

So, teachers, public employees and government workers are often blamed for a situation they did not create. They are called “greedy” or “lazy” simply for demanding fair wages. Faced with the results of a crumbling society, these workers of modest means are told they must do more with less—make bricks without straw. Corporations shut down factories, close stores, lay off workers and then blame the workers and blame the unions for the backlash by the taskmasters.

We have seen over the past 45 years an economy that has, overall, grown tremendously. However, most of the gains have gone only to the very top, primarily to the top 1% of the households in America. This is undisputed. In addition, we have seen a *decrease* in household income—adjusted for inflation—for average workers. Again, this is undisputed. This trend has intensified during the so-called recovery after 2008; it was largely a recovery for the wealthy. And again during COVID billionaires and corporations made record gains. We have seen an erosion of the middle class and growing poverty. Wall St. has been setting records while Main St. has been struggling.

If we take a step back, our problem is not lack of money in this nation; it’s inequality. It’s not a lack of prosperity; it’s that the prosperity has not been shared.

Instead of blaming and oppressing workers and the poor – taking away the straw – it seems to me that we need to give them more straw, more resources.

Instead of cutting social security benefits that keep many out of poverty, instead of breaking unions and decreasing wages and benefits, it seems to be we should be doing the opposite.

From a faith perspective, what should we do? What would Moses do?

- Stop the unrestrained military adventures and out of control military spending.
- Re-regulate the markets. Protect the rights of workers, the poor and the elderly. Strengthen, not weaken, labor laws. (Are unions perfect? Hardly. Are there abuses in organized labor? Yes, of course. Yet, unions have, in the past, helped level the playing field where there is an extreme imbalance of power. The ability to bargain as a unit is crucial to the well being of society.)
- Re-institute a more graduated tax system. Even Warren Buffett has publicly asked for this in the *New York Times* several years ago:

But what I paid was only 17.4 percent of my taxable income – and that’s actually a lower percentage than was paid by any of the other 20 people in our office... My friends and I have been coddled long enough by a billionaire-friendly Congress. It’s time for our government to get serious about shared sacrifice.

But year after year we have seen our law makers do the exact opposite! Military spending has seen a huge increase. Consumer, financial and worker protections have been taken away and the super wealthy and corporations received a huge tax reductions that add trillions of dollars to our debt. While much of this money has simply been hoarded in stock buy-backs, we are already hearing calls to cut social security, medicare and healthcare, blaming the workers for the debt, telling us all to make bricks without straw and do more with less.

In our faith tradition, whenever a nation’s wealth becomes so unequal and the disparities so great for whatever reason, then the jubilee ethic of the Hebrew scriptures and of Jesus call for ways to redistribute that wealth more broadly among all.

Failure to do this is both morally deficient and practically short-sighted. For societies where workers are allowed a larger share of the pie are healthier and do better. It’s not just the right thing to do; it’s the smart thing to do.

Let me put this another way. Economists such as Robert Reich, Joseph Stiglitz, Paul Krugman, and others talk about our current economic situation as a problem on the demand side. It is not billionaires, but the average consumers, who are the real “job creators.” Right now consumers are not spending and demand is low because wages have been going down. Meanwhile costs for everything have gone up, due mostly to record corporate profits, and so people are spending less. Businesses aren’t raising wages, leading to less money to spend, and we have this downward spiral. Severe inequality leads to this loss of demand and a downward spiral.

The last time this happened, the government instituted programs like improving infrastructure, the WPA and the CCC and the G.I. bill and the like, leading to better jobs, more money to spend, leading to higher wages, helping to change the spiral upward.

The government also addressed income inequality, setting a minimum wage, instituting labor laws, protecting organized labor, and establishing a more graduated tax code. These systemic changes helped to create a more healthy, equal and prosperous economy. Prosperity that is shared leads to increased demand and an upward spiral.

In the 1960’s Martin Luther King, Jr. noted,

The labor movement was the principal force that transformed misery and despair into hope and progress. Out of its bold struggles, economic and social reform gave birth to unemployment insurance, old age pensions, government relief for the destitute, and above all new wage levels that meant not mere survival, but a tolerable life. The captains of industry did not lead this transformation; they resisted it until they were overcome.

These efforts contributed to an upward spiral of economic growth. It was one of our great spiritual forebears, Walter Rauschenbush, who said in 1912,

Wealth is to a nation what manure is to a farm. If the farmer spreads it evenly over the soil, it will enrich the whole. If he should leave it in heaps, the land would be impoverished.

That's what has been happening. Wealth has been piling up in heaps, and it reeks to the high heavens! Impoverishing the land, impoverishing the workers, instead of being absorbed and enriching our common life.

Friends, as our spiritual awareness evolves from a "me" centered consciousness to a "we" centered consciousness, the call of justice and the cause of the worker cannot be ignored.

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)