

Unity Church Sermon
Sept. 6, 2009

“She Works Hard for the Money (And You’d Better Treat Her Right)”

Sisters and brothers, I stand before you, humbly and proudly, if that’s possible, as a union man. My wife Mary and I are both career union people, me 30 years in the Newspaper Guild, Mary a Teamster, I call her a “teamstah sistah,” and you darn better well treat the Teamsters right! I’ve even been on strike, in the early 1980s, and I think I understand a few things about the struggle between capital and labor. And I want to report that I’ve seen progress. I’ve seen my union make a difference. For instance, I watched women in my workplace in the 1990s win a grievance, a class action legal struggle to get equal pay for their work as editors and reporters, after many decades, all of human history actually, of institutionalized gender inequality.

The job I had, for which I was reasonably compensated, thanks largely to my union, was wonderful and rewarding. I had the privilege of serving for 30-some years as a professional observer and journalist, a sports writer really, for the ultimate, extreme sport, a blood sport, also known as, American politics. It was and is a gory and gaudy spectacle at times, but of course it’s about much more than sport. It’s a great and fascinating and important clash involving, basically, WHO....GETS... HOW MUCH. And religion, and philosophy, and history have a lot to do with it, and it’s a lot of fun, and sometimes, amusing. Here is one of my favorite memories.

This was sometime in the 1990s. A very conservative rural legislator rises on the floor of the Minnesota House to respond to a liberal member who was invoking Christian principles of love and sharing and the brotherhood and sisterhood of humankind and our

basic equality in God's eyes. The progressive legislator was advancing a bill that would provide more rights and compensation for working folks. The progressive legislator was making the case that this particular bill was supported not just by labor unions but by the leading Lutheran and Catholic prelates in the state, the ELCA bishop and the archbishop themselves. Now this would be an uncomfortable moment for any Minnesota politician, to be informed that they are at odds with the mainstream Lutheran and Catholic hierarchies on anything important. These two rival gangs, followers of both the Pope and his arch-rival Martin Luther, are now quite friendly to each other and also very progressive on economic matters, and they pretty much account for everybody here in Lake Wobegone, or at least everybody's grandparents. So anyway, the anti-labor legislator, listened to this, got to his feet, took his microphone to his mouth, hemmed and hawed a bit and finally he said: "Aaaahh, you know, Representative So-and-So, ...EVERYBODY'S a liberal on SUNDAYS." There was nervous laughter, on both sides of the aisle, but especially nervous on the more piously Christian side of the aisle.

So. Here's a conservative legislator saying that what HAPPENS in church should by God STAY in church. First thing that occurred to many people in the chamber was, wait a minute, it's the fundamentalists, God bless them and they are right about this, who more frequently emphasize, that we should live our faith every day of the week, 24/7. But of course the legislator was telling an inconvenient truth, embarrassing as it was to his cause and uncomfortable as it is even to those of us who represent the liberal vanguard of the Protestant Reformation.

The truth is that all Christians, even those Calvinistic and rigid white Protestants, can be wonderfully loving and liberal on Sundays. But they and we, their direct descendants, also happen to be among the richest people on earth, vigorous practitioners and primary beneficiaries of the American brand of capitalism. And

most of us, during the week, have to get down to business, yes even Unitarians, and Lord knows we have plenty of accomplished capitalists amongst us.

And that inevitably puts us at odds with labor, organized or otherwise.

A little historical digression on this. Our church's record in behalf of the labor struggle, in context, is pretty darn good, even heroic, compared to the other Protestant religions, which have overwhelmingly comprised the ruling class in this country. But it's not perfect. My reading of Unitarian sermons in the late 1880s reveals support for ending child labor, for the minimum wage, even equal pay for women. But there's also a lot of anxiety and hand-wringing in the writing and the sermons about the suspicion that the whole movement might be, gasp, socialistic, or even communistic. Our Unitarian Universalist leadership and the money that sustained us, of course, was drawn from the merchant class of the industrial northeastern and Union states, and the ministers in their sermons were actually quite worried about class warfare, especially if the other classes were actually winning, in any significant way. This war, of course, actually never ends and most of the time the working classes tend to lose.

And like many of those 19th Century Unitarians, during the week and away from our sentimental and spiritual time, many of us do need to get about the business of taking care of business, making the stuff, closing the sale, meeting the quarterly profit goals, moving the product, finishing the project, keeping the costs down, charging as high a price as possible to our customers and consumers and paying our employees as little as possible, or as little as the market and our conscience will bear. This dynamic happens in some form in every sector, public, private and non-profit. I do it myself in the management of my own non-profit.

Labor is a problem to be dealt with, and the problem, basically, is how to get more of it for less.

This underlying, fundamental principle of a market economy and all organizations, is not necessarily evil. It drives us toward efficiency, something neither Jesus nor Buddha seemed to talk a lot about, but important nevertheless. But let's acknowledge something. The magic of the free market and individuals being free to pursue their self-interest produces abundance and innovation and technological progress, all of which can also serve toward improving lives and expanding social justice. Labor-saving technology in the home, for instance, and science and medicine and technology and business working together, played a part in everything from the liberation of women to the lengthening of our lives, to providing universal access to information and transportation and cheaper food.

And so the American experience has very much been about taming and harnessing this useful beast, in enlightening capitalism and the business moguls, in reminding these heroic captains of industry that human capital, the sailors on their ship, are their most important resource. We practical progressives make the point that lifting people up instead of keeping them down, and helping ALL people realize their full potential, will produce better economic units, a better society, and it will be good for business in the long run.

But as we've learned again this last year, for the umpteenth time it seems, a relentless focus on the private gain, on quarterly profits and unregulated economic freedom, turns out to not be so good for most of the rest of us. Not so good for "ordinary" working people, but who really are extraordinary in God's eyes, not so good for folks who mostly work as employees at jobs, not so good for people who do not refer to what they do as "careers," and for those who do not mostly own or manage things.

I actually think that a majority of people in our nation and our world and especially in our beloved Minnesota, recognize the folly of worshipping this market, and providing the endless human sacrifice it too often demands. Most folks recognize the folly of refusing to intervene to soften its inevitable and brutal tendency to divide humans into a few big winners and a minority of truly comfortable families, and lot of losers, or strugglers.

Worshipping the market, refusing to bring public interest to bear to ameliorate outcomes _ to sanctify the private interest and to ignore or debase the public interest _ really could be likened to worshipping a false god, a golden calf, and a brutal Baal who demands human sacrifice at that.

That's an Old Testament imagery, the golden calf, and my own Unitarian convictions were arrived at after a fundamentalist Protestant Old Testament upbringing, reading the Bible repeatedly and thoroughly, believing in it's literal truth. Like Dwight Eisenhower and Michael Jackson, I was raised by Jehovah's Witnesses. It was a little weird, but not bad as Protestant cults go. I once really scared a former pastor here when I told him that I thought we UUs had the real and whole truth and that we ought to take it door-to-door and start condemning non-Unitarians.

But back to my Bible study, I always was kind of fascinated by Genesis and the story about how labor, work, both the toiling in the field kind and the childbirth kind, and now by the way women have to do both kinds, was at the heart of God's original curse for woman and man.

The Old Testament tells us that after banishing Adam and Eve from Eden and a paradise where everything was provided for them, they were consigned to live by the sweat of their brows and give birth in great pain. Another quick aside here, they were kicked out of Eden, best I can tell, for being Unitarians, for intellectual

curiosity and seeking knowledge that only God and the angels had, for defying authority and orthodoxy and eating from a tree that gave them knowledge. And that resulted in Paradise Lost, God cursing the very ground upon which they walked, condemning them to the pain and suffering of having to work hard, to sweat and toil at often repetitive and menial work, to wrest survival from the earth's finite resources AND toward getting back in God's graces so they could lay about in heavenly indolence all day. This myth of an early paradise and a future paradise, distinguished mostly by leisure time, is a common element in the founding beliefs in many of the great faith systems. \

At the same time, there's a great and contradictory universal human truth that tells us that work and labor is a great joy, that work makes us free and brings us a sense of fulfillment and completeness, that having good and important work to do is in fact the very best thing about life. But this is only true, or especially true, if it's meaningful, purposeful work that brings a sense of productivity and belonging and contributing. And this is true only if God's children are allowed to enjoy much or more of the fruit of that labor, and live under their own vine and fig tree. And because all kinds of work does not exactly qualify as fulfilling and interesting, at the very least, especially in the richest nation on earth, all work should pay enough for a decent living, or a living wage, now calculated at about \$12-14 an hour for each of two parents trying to support a family of 4. Millions of Americans work for much, much less than that.

So it's not the work itself, the labor and the sweat, that's turned out to be a curse. It's the oppressive hierarchies in civilization since the fall of woman and man, or since the mythological paradise of pre-civilization, that gives too FEW people --- monarchies and oligarchies --- enormous compensation for what they do and ownership of the land and property and means of production. Meanwhile, far too MANY people are given the lot of building the

pyramids and lugging the huge loads up the incline, day after day in the hot boiling sun, for nothing, or next to nothing, and no health-care either.

The unfairness of labor without fair compensation, various forms of slavery _ either outright or through political, cultural, religious and economic systems that exploit and victimize _ is a central theme of the democratic human struggle and our western religious tradition. Think of the Israelites in Egypt and God's delivery of them from slavery. Remember the Christians enslaved under Rome and how they prevailed, eventually enslaving non-Christians, of course.

As Americans we mark our progress by looking back at forms of liberation from this exploitation. In our own western hemisphere, we look back in horror at the forced conversion and attempted enslavement of aboriginal people to Christendom and to bring them under the English and Spanish or French yoke. We are proud of the Revolution and our escape from illegitimate levies, without representation, on our labor. We are proud of the great fight led by liberal religious founders of our own Unitarian Universalist denomination against the enslavement of African people. Interestingly, southern defenders of slavery used the Bible's apparent approval or neutrality on the subject to advance their secessionist cause.

In the last century, we've made enormous progress against the much more subtle forms of semi-slavery that come with unbridled capitalism and the slanted bargaining table set up between employers and employees: the simple and basic right to organize, child labor laws, the 40-hour work week and overtime compensation, the minimum wage, the civil rights movement and ongoing efforts to finish the Emancipation Proclamation and end the de facto slavery imposed on people of color, the migrant

workers' reforms, and in more recent years but throughout, history, hugely important, the oppression of women in the workforce.

Women have benefited from comparable worth legislation, equalizing compensation, opening up a universe of professions and higher level positions that were closed in most every hierarchy since recorded history. I was struck on a trip to Alaska this summer by how many young women were driving the boats, serving as deckhands, leading the rugged wilderness trips, not just tending the cash registers. Women with education and ambition and who have the advantage of middle-class start, have more opportunities than they used to have. Labor unions themselves have finally caught up. For the first time, the Minnesota AFL-CIO and its 300,000 members will be led by a woman president, Char Knutson, of St. Paul.

Now the bad news.

There's a tendency, a very human nature, after such progressive exertions to relax, to consider certain territory as safe. It's never safe. From a much broader perspective, aside from the gains that some women and racial minorities have made, and overall gains that produced a high-water mark of economic equality in the 1970s, much of this progress has actually been undone over the last 30 years. We have lost ground. We could characterize the last 100 years as two steps forward, big step back, lots of steps to take.

I encourage you to take a look at a growing body of literature about our inequality crisis. Among these are a recent book "Inequality Matters" and a recent study, "Confronting the Gloves-Off Economy," gloves-off being a reference to 30 years of anti-labor, anti-worker aggression by the business sector and federal government leadership that's mostly been openly hostile to labor, much of it in the guise of a global competitiveness mantra.

Statistics abound proving a growing disparity not just between rich and poor and top and bottom but between an affluent top 1 percent and 10 percent and everyone else. Average real income for the bottom 90 percent in American has stagnated or declined, but leaped by 150 percent for those in the top 1 percent, in Minnesota, that's those making more than about \$350,000 a year. The top 5 percent of wealthiest households, get this, control 60 percent of the wealth.

Another way to look at it, The top 1 percent of people in income and wealth in the United States now have a larger share of income and wealth than the top 1 percent has had since just before the Great Depression. Need we be reminded that we are now in the throes of a Great Recession. The racial and gender disparities on this score remain stark, better than they were before the Civil Rights Act and the women's liberation movement of 45 years ago, but stagnating and even backsliding in recent years.

And let's drill down and get specific on just one group, working women and especially women of color in Minnesota. The median annual wage for a full-time, year-round male worker is 50 percent higher than it is for a woman of color, \$42,000 to \$28,000, according to the Minnesota Office on the Economic Status of Women.

Women in Minnesota and the United States suffer great economic disadvantage for the devaluation of the absolutely valuable work of bearing and raising children, even though their educational attainment is now equal to or greater than their male counterparts. They suffer outrageously unequal economic conditions if they are single mothers and heads of households. Female headed families households with children suffer from a poverty rate of 30 percent, compared to 3 percent for married families.

After Labor Day, when the work week begins, and Sunday's liberalism begins to fade a little bit, I'm wondering if we all might consider doing some small additional thing about living in a society that has the most inequality of the world's wealthy nations.

We all know that this room is filled with good people who already are doing good deeds to ameliorate these injustices. But here are some specific public policies, again focusing just on working women and women of color, that are suggested by the Minnesota Office on the Economic Status of Women.

**We can continue to work to place more monetary value in work that is traditionally done by women. In-home child-care and domestic workers now number in the millions in this nation, their median wage is half the national average, they have no representation, no benefits and no health-care.

**We can foster girls' interest in science, technology and engineering, and higher paying careers, starting at a young age

**We can institutionalize work structures with flexible arrangements, job-sharing, mobile offices, flexible schedules focusing on an outcome-based work environment

**We can make child-care assistance a program available to all families who are eligible, with a steeply graduated support structure that reaches well into the middle-income levels

Our spiritual salvation is and should be about more than these material things, dollars and cents. Our striving for the sublime, and the wonders of the mystery, and finding inner peace _ has to be about more than these monetary considerations, and who gets how much, and a striving for a perfect allocation of money and wealth.

But then again, Jesus himself said that we will be judged by how the least among us are treated.

These conditions can be improved, and they will be improved. Lincoln spoke the truth when he said that “a patient confidence in the ultimate justice of the people” is the great hope of the world. We should be full of optimism about the future of humankind and the power of knowledge and loving-kindness, and progressive action to prevail.

I’m reminded of this famous poster from the World War II era, showing the robust, determined woman in factory-worker togs, flexing her bicep, getting ready to do her part on the assembly line, to make the world safe from racist and fascist and nationalistic slave holding tyrants, with the bold words,

WE CAN DO IT!

She did do it, and she and other workers are still doing it, and she ought to get paid more, and we’ll ALL be better off if we **TREAT HER RIGHT!**

Amen.

