

Labor's Love Lost

by Scott J. Rubin at UUCSV, Northumberland, PA
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Good morning. About a month ago, I thought of this great title for a Labor Day Week-end sermon: "Labor's Love Lost." It had a kind of twisted reference to Shakespeare, it had meaning, it had alliteration, it had everything -- except a sermon to go with it. But I loved the title, so I gave it to Lenore weeks before I had even tried to write the sermon. What a mistake!

After thinking about it for a couple of weeks, I finally said to myself, "Self, how hard could this be? The title obviously says that we're going to talk about how great things were in the good old days. Then we'll say how we've lost that 'love of labor' our parents and grandparents cherished. And we'll wrap it up with a call to action -- we'll urge everyone to go back to work on Tuesday and really try to love their jobs."

And Self said, "Yeah, right. Things were really terrific in the good all days. It's like the title of the book: 'The Good Old Days, They Were Terrible.' Look at the readings you chose. Those young blouse makers 80 years ago really loved their jobs. They got paid next to nothing, they got sexually harassed, they worked long hours, lost fingers in the machines, and even got to die in fires in those horrible buildings they worked in. I can just see them sitting around on Sunday night, so anxious to get back to work on Monday."

"Hey, Self," I protested, "it wasn't that bad. These people really cared about their work. Look what they went through. They formed unions against all odds, risking injury, loss of their jobs, ridicule, even death. These people really cared about their co-workers."

"Oh, sure, go bleeding heart on me." Self was on a roll. "These people didn't care about their jobs or their co-workers -- they cared about themselves, just like everyone else. They wanted a bigger paycheck so they could buy more stuff. They wanted shorter hours, safer working conditions, more days off. They just wanted to get more for doing less. It sounds like good old-fashioned greed to me. Joe Steelworker didn't love his job, he loved himself."

"And, by the way, " Self continued, "I know someone else around here who could love his Self a little bit more, too. I thought you were going to bring me some candy."

I went and got Self some M&M's. "Now can we get back to work on this sermon?" Self didn't answer -- he just kept muttering, "Melts in your mouth, not in your hands."

Self was occupied for a while, and it gave me some more time to think. Maybe Self was right. Labor unions weren't formed by a bunch of social activists who wanted to help their neighbors. They were formed by people who wanted to better their own lives. But what was so bad about that. How many people do you know who would risk losing their jobs or getting hurt in order to get a fairer shake from their employers? Maybe they didn't "love" their jobs, but they sure had respect for themselves.

Self's hands were turning red and green and the sugar was kicking in. Now he was getting really feisty.

"So, hot shot, have you found a sermon to go with that ridiculous title yet. You UUs think you have to refer to great literature like Shakespeare in order to make your point. This is a religion, remember. How about using the Bible, for a change?"

Now I had him. Self knew next to nothing about the Bible, or so I thought. "For instance?" I asked.

"Why not use a nice play on words of one of the Ten Commandments: 'Love Your Labor as Your Self'. And speaking of loving your Self, how about something to drink?"

I was stunned. I figured Self would think that the Ten Commandments was a David Letterman gag. But I got him his drink and, while he slurped, I thought some more about what he said.

Maybe that is a better way to think about it. It's not so much that people have to love their jobs, it's that they have to respect what they do as much as they respect themselves. Maybe that's what our parents and grandparents had that we're missing. They respected their abilities and tried to be the best they could at what they did. Maybe being a steelworker or a shopkeeper wasn't the most rewarding job in the world, but it was all they had and they made the best of it. They didn't focus on their own shortcomings, or on the things they didn't have; they worked as hard as they could so that their children could have a better life. It wasn't about having the nicest house or the coolest car; it was about building something for your children. They respected their ability to improve the world for their kids.

"STOP!" yelled Self, as he spit his Pepsi half way across the room. "That's about the dumbest thing I've ever heard. If all they cared about were their children, then why all the emphasis on holidays, shorter work days, vacations, and all those other perks. If they really wanted to build a better life for their children, they would have continued to work 12 hour days and bargained away everything for higher wages. But did they? No sir, they accepted lower wages in exchange for softer chairs, longer breaks, vacations, and shorter work days. As I said before, it sounds like good old-fashioned greed to me."

Self was smirking. I had to do something. He started this stuff with the Bible. Maybe that's the key. I've been concentrating on this century. Maybe I need to go back to biblical times to find my answer.

"Hey, Self," I said with a little smile on my face, "if people only worked for greed, how do you explain those guys in biblical times. Look at the prophet Isaiah. He had a dream of peace in the world. And that dream meant that instead of waging war, people would work in the fields. That was his dream, that people would be able to work: 'They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.' He didn't dream of people sitting around doing nothing, he dreamed of them working."

"Yeah, and Isaiah was a real popular guy," Self retorted. "Remember how he ended his great book of the Bible?"

I didn't have a clue. Self was now quizzing me on the Bible. I gulped and said it was just on the tip of my tongue, but ...

When Self stopped laughing, he continued: "Here's what your nice guy Isaiah with his dream for the world had to say: 'From new moon to new moon, and from sabbath to sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, says the Lord. And they shall go out and look at the dead bodies of the people who have rebelled against me; for their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence of all flesh.' How's that for your prophet's dream of the world? Does that sound like the great peacemaker; the man who values hard work?"

I just stood there with my mouth open. I didn't know what to say.

Finally, Self dug in the knife a little deeper. "Now if your boy wonder Isaiah had wanted to set out a vision of the world that people would want to follow, he should have said something like: 'Beat your swords into lounge chairs.' That would have gotten the people excited -- just like your unionists this century."

"That's not fair!" I blurted out. "People haven't always been so totally self-centered. They've made sacrifices. They saved for the future, instead of spending it all right away. It's only in the last few years that we've become so totally focused on ourselves and our immediate desires."

Self was doubled over in laughter. Either that or the combination of M&Ms and Pepsi had given him serious stomach cramps. It's always hard to tell whether Self is laughing or crying.

Anyway, I took advantage of his temporary inability to speak to give this some more thought. I had to start thinking more logically. Step one: What's the problem? Okay, the problem is that we're too self-centered; we don't keep the big picture in focus; we jump from one job to another focusing on the paycheck or the perks, instead of on what we're actually accomplishing. We put up with the ulcers, high blood pressure, headaches, and sleepless nights, instead of focusing on what's really important: how healthy are we; are we being good parents and good neighbors; are we doing something useful with our lives; are we doing something to make the world a better place for our children and grandchildren.

Step two: What's the solution? Start by loving and respecting yourself. Realize that you matter. And this means that you shouldn't abuse yourself. Your kids will love you just the same -- maybe even more -- if you bring home a few dollars less, but have more time to spend with them. You don't need the ulcers and the hassles -- only someone who doesn't love herself would do that. You need to love yourself. That will help you keep work in perspective and maybe regain that love of labor that we sometimes seem to have lost.

Self was sitting up again. "Hmmm," he said. "Love your Self. I like the sound of that. Does this mean you're taking me out to dinner, tonight?"