

The Work of Love

Romans 12

Whitefish UMC

Labor Day weekend, August 31, 2008

- † For us it's just another three-day weekend. True, it's significant because it marks the end of summer and this year the return to school for our children. But in the community of Canaryville, on Chicago's south side, Labor Day Sunday was a major event—a really big deal.
- † My first parish, at Union Ave. United Methodist Church, celebrated Labor Day as if it were, well, Thanksgiving. And in a way, it was. You see Union Avenue Church, otherwise known as the “M.E.” (for Methodist Episcopal Church) is sandwiched in between the taverns and huge Roman Catholic church in what is known as the “back of the yards” neighborhood in Chicago.
- † For those of you unfamiliar with Chicago, that means that the church was part of the community that housed the workers for the old and infamous Chicago stockyards, historically the center of the meat packing industry for the whole country.
- † As a girl from Chicago's suburbs, the stockyards meant that smelly part of the city that you had to go through to get somewhere exciting and fun downtown. My grandfather, though, knew it as a boy as the home of Irish and German immigrants—his home—that provided work and community in the new homeland.
- † But it wasn't until I had almost turned fifty, after living most of my adult life in Montana, that I really got to know the community of Canaryville, the part of the city known as “back of the yards.”

- † To begin to understand the community I was sent to serve, I reread Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, written in 1906. Hear these words, describing the vision of that part of the city:

The line of buildings stood clear-cut and black against the sky; here and there out of the mass rose the great chimneys, with the river of smoke streaming away to the end of the world. It was a study in colors now, this smoke; in the sunset light it was black and brown and gray and purple. All the sordid questions of the place were gone—in the twilight it was a vision of power. To the two who stood watching while the darkness swallowed it up, it seemed a dream of wonder, with its tale of human energy, of things being done, of employment for thousands upon thousands of men, of opportunity and freedom, of life, and love, and joy. When they came away, arm in arm, Jurgis was saying, "Tomorrow I shall go there and get a job."

- † Of course that was the fictional Jurgis's vision before he joined the workforce in the stockyards. At first he loves his work, bewildered by the feelings of hatred for it by his fellow workers. But as time passes, Jurgis becomes enslaved to his employer—he loses his wife because of a sexual assault by a foreman. And he loses his child to disease caused by horrible conditions in the community.
- † Upton Sinclair's novel ultimately had greater impact of the lives of workers in the "back of the yards" than any other work of literature had had before for any oppressed community—perhaps with the exception of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Following its publication, the public was so outraged that it launched

a government investigation of the meatpacking plants of Chicago, and changed the food laws of America.

- † Ninety years later, into that community, on the Sunday before Labor Day, I ventured. In some ways the drive from the upscale neighborhood of Evanston, home to Northwestern University and my seminary, was a journey from one world into another. And I confess I was scared, uncertain, and wondering how I would fit.
- † As I think back on it, I marvel that the church I was to serve was built in 1905, just before Sinclair's *The Jungle* was published. The owners of the meatpacking companies, the Swift and Armour families, had the church constructed originally for the managers of the plants.
- † But as time went on and the neighborhood changed, the owners and managers moved to better neighborhoods. The church became the home of workers and a birthing ground for what became known as the "social gospel" in the early 1900's.
- † My first Sunday, the sermon consisted of a dramatic reading by a woman dressed in the garb of that period. She preached the words of Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker Movement. I remember thinking, "What am I doing here?"
- † But ultimately, the words of Dorothy Day proved prescient. She had abandoned the pious Episcopalian church of her youth. She frequented a saloon called the Golden Swan, befriending other Greenwich Village intellectuals like Eugene O'Neill, John Dos Passos, and Malcolm Cowley.
- † In that setting she met Upton Sinclair and Jack London and began to wake up to the plight of the poor. Her life was anything but perfect—she had an abortion, got a divorce, and ultimately had a daughter out

of wedlock. The church could have rejected her, but it didn't. It was her desire to bring her daughter to God that led her back to the church.

- † There she began to read the Bible and to find in it Jesus' call to serve the poor. She embodied what the Bible urges on us all, that we be doers, not just hearers of God's word. In some ways her life was a visible prayer.
- † She once said, "Does God have a set way of prayer, a way that He expects each of us to follow? I doubt it. I believe some people—lots of people—pray through the witness of their lives, through the work they do, the friendships they have, the love they offer people and receive from people. Since when are *words* the only acceptable way of prayer?"
- † It was in that humble little church in Canaryville, back of the yards, that I learned that Dorothy Day was right. She might have been thinking of Paul's words in Romans 12 that we read today as she said them.
- † For in this passage, Paul says that the only real worship is to offer our very lives, our bodies, our skills, our possessions—as a "living sacrifice." This sacrificial worship comes not out of obligation, but out of gratitude and freedom.
- † I learned about this kind of worship at Union Ave. UMC, where the prayer time took longer than the sermon. The congregation of that little church was a motley crew indeed—including some kids who just came for the breakfast we started before church but ended up staying for church. There were a few teachers, social workers, but

mostly poor working class folk doing their best to stave off the threat of gangs, drugs, and poverty.

- † Each Sunday, Ray, a longshoreman who looked like a short version of Popeye, got up in his jeans and white t-shirt with the sleeves rolled up over his massive biceps, to pray. We had “joys and concerns” in that church, too.
- † Ray would tell about a new threat to lay off some of the teachers at the local school and ask everyone to pray. Or he’d rejoice that a local kid had been released from jail and was sober. Or he’d warn of a new gang that had occupied a local playground.
- † In that church, they knew how to “run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good.” Their lives depended on it. It was there that I learned about practicing playing second fiddle, about not quitting in hard times, praying hard, helping needy Christians.
- † There I also learned about really inventive hospitality. You see, they offered really loving hospitality to everybody—including me, the suburban woman from the north shore.
- † They invited even the thugs into church. They celebrated with one another when things were good and showed up with food and help when things were bad.
- † It was in that church that I learned about “getting along with each other, about not being stuck-up. About making friends with nobodies, and not being the great somebody.”
- † It was as if Union Avenue UMC was a training ground for the real Christian life. And the training manual might have been this passage from Paul’s letter to the Romans.

- † Don't get me wrong, they weren't perfect—they had their annoying people and difficult people and challenging times. One New Year's Eve, two families got together, drank too many beers, and one of the men ended up with a knife wound that nearly severed an artery. The other guy ended up in jail.
- † The daughter of one of them, a little girl who had started coming to church and was the first child I ever baptized, had to hide under the bed. She told me later that she had prayed so hard to God to stop the fighting, but He didn't.
- † I remember being so angry at those parents and the mother's new violent boyfriend. And yet I had to learn to discover beauty in that child's mother even when I wanted to shake her and tell her to get away from that abusive man.
- † Why am I telling you these stories of that little church on the south side where Labor Day really meant something and I learned the hard lessons of living out Paul's blueprint that we read today in the scripture?
- † Maybe it's because we are so removed from what it means for some of our brothers and sisters to celebrate Labor Day as if it were Thanksgiving. But more importantly, I hope we can learn that loving each other as Jesus asks us to do and Paul reminds us isn't just about being nice to each other.
- † Of course that's part of it. But what if we took these words to heart? What if we were to live as if they were a matter of life and death? What would that look like in lovely Whitefish, Montana?
- † Of course we don't live in the blighted neighborhoods of the inner city or the dying rural communities of our state. But we can learn

from the churches that serve those communities as the body of the living Christ.

- † And I think we are well on our way. I marvel at the way you lift each other up when struggle and grief come. Your hospitality is known and respected in our community, even when it's unpopular with some.
- † As the political season gets more edgy and personal, we have the opportunity to practice Paul's advice with one another even more. Each of us wants to put our faith into practice with our vote, our politics.
- † May we practice playing second fiddle with one another this political season. And may we keep on becoming the kind of Christians who love not only in name but in action. May we love our enemies, offer help to each of those in need, including ourselves, so that the love of Jesus may be made real in us.
- † Remember that we understand best and deepest how God loves and forgives us when we are, in our limited but growing way, extending that kind of love and forgiveness to others.
- † And this Labor Day weekend, may our work be love, the love known to us in Jesus Christ our Savior. And may it be for us, too, a time of thanksgiving. Amen.

Sources:

Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*. 1906.

James. C. Howell, *Saints, Misfits, and Martyrs*. Nashville, 1999.

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