

It's Not About You

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship with Communion
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
September 1, 2019 <> Labor Day Weekend
Text: Luke 14:7-14

Peter and I enjoy watching historical documentaries on television, one of the idiosyncrasies we share. Peter generally prefers American history, Civil War era through World War II, while early Christian history and British history appeals to me. However, just a few weeks ago we enjoyed something together! We watched a great series on the History Channel called *The Men Who Built America*. It tells the stories of the men behind the Industrial Revolution in this country – Cornelius Vanderbilt, John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie and Henry Frick, just to name a few. To say these men built fortunes from nothing is the stuff of American lore that maintains anyone willing to work hard can get rich in this land of seemingly limitless opportunity – at least it was in the mid 1800's when the stories of these men began.

These men were ambitious to be sure, ruthlessly so in many situations. As time passed and their successes grew they became more and more convinced of the specialness of the unique genius each of them displayed. Cornelius Vanderbilt had the foresight to recognize the vital role of railroads in our fledgling country. John D. Rockefeller recognized the value of kerosene and found a way to mass produce it to such an extent that candles quickly became a

thing of the past as kerosene lamps, chandeliers, even street lights lit up America. Andrew Carnegie had the genius to see the significance of steel as a construction material making gigantic bridges over huge rivers like the Mississippi a reality, not to mention the construction of cities that reached toward the skies as skyscraper construction became feasible. Henry Frick, who for a time worked as CEO of Carnegie Steel, was best known as a ruthless union buster whose successes in the steel business led to the creation of what is now known as the United States Steel company, the largest steel manufacturing company in the world.

In addition to an obvious genius for industrial development and the growth of personal fortunes and wealth – they all had the same goal of one day being recognized as the wealthiest man in the world – these gentlemen had one more thing in common. Their genius and their fortunes were built on the labors of thousands of nameless, faceless people who worked in their factories, bought their products, traveled on their railroads. But these men didn't see any of these nameless, faceless people as people – in the same way they saw themselves as people. What mattered about these other people was the money they represented – the money they cost as laborers expecting a wage and the money they spent as consumers of products. That's it. It wasn't that these wealthy, Gilded Age industrialists were incapable of seeing these people as people. It just never occurred

to them. These people – the laboring class, the working class – just didn't register with them as people at all. As cost centers? Yes. As income sources through the money they spent? Yes. As people beloved of God just as much as they were? No way.

Proof of this attitude is made very clear through one historic event in Pennsylvania. The Johnstown Flood of 1889 wiped out almost the entire town of Johnstown, Pennsylvania when an earthen dam holding back an artificial lake gave way after a period of heavy rains. 2200 people were killed in a matter of hours and most of Johnstown was destroyed when a wall of water and debris 30 feet high and a half mile wide tore through the center of town. What does this have to do with these wealthy industrialists? A lot, actually, since the lake had been created for them, more specifically Andrew Carnegie and Henry Frick and their friends, when they built themselves a nice little private club in the Pennsylvania countryside. They built the dam, and then didn't want to spend the money to properly maintain it. In fact, the only money they spent on the dam was to lower it, thereby weakening it, so that the roadway on the top of the dam which led to their private club could be more easily traversed by their fine and sumptuous carriages. After a period of heavy rainfall lasting several weeks, the dam collapsed and the town was washed away. Thousands dead. Lives of many more thousands changed forever.

But did Carnegie and Frick pay any real penalty for their actions? Their private club was widely criticized and several lawsuits pursued, but none of them were successful. So much for justice.

These men of great wealth and privilege forgot something basic to their humanity in their rise to the top of industry and wealth. They forgot it was not about them. The lives lost in the Johnstown Flood, the lives lost in the Homestead Strike of 1892, the lives lost building railroads, drilling for oil and then processing it – these human lives ceased to hold any meaning for these industrialists who are held up to this day as icons in this country for what it means to be an American success story. Dear friends, I see no heroes in these men. Genius? Absolutely. Willingness to work hard for what they envisioned? Yes, to a point. But in the process of creating their financial empires, they made the decision over and over again that other lives not their own were an acceptable price to pay to achieve their goals. They continually wrote out checks to themselves that were paid for by other peoples' lives – those who died in accidents, industrial and otherwise – as well as those who suffered throughout their lives due to meager wages and miserable living and working conditions. Despite what they thought, and obviously believed, the whole world did not exist for the sole benefit of these men. It was NOT ever just about them, a lesson

they forgot over and over again, and for which others far removed from them paid the price over and over again.

On this Labor Day Sunday, I find myself wondering how Carnegie and Frick, Vanderbilt and Rockefeller would respond to the parable Jesus told in the text we read this morning from the Gospel of Luke. Using the example of finding a seat at a wedding banquet, Jesus explains that one should never arrive to any celebration and immediately take the best seat. This, he explained, could create a very awkward situation for you and your host if your host then needed to come and ask you to move to a different seat because someone else the host considered more important was intended to sit there. Now, I'm sure Carnegie and Frick would have been perplexed by such a question, even from Jesus himself, because they would not be able to imagine that someone more important than them deserved such a seat. Anticipating precisely that response, Jesus would have responded to them: "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

But I deserve to be exalted Frick and Carnegie would gasp! Look at what we've accomplished! Look at all the jobs we've created! Look at all the money we have in the bank! Look at all the worthy causes we support! Of course, we deserve to be exalted! Of course, we deserve the best seat at the table! No, Jesus says. You don't. What you think of yourself doesn't matter.

In fact, if you have such an unrelentingly high opinion of yourself, God's judgment of you will be exactly the opposite. The exalted will be humbled and the humbled will be exalted.

This theme of the exalted being humbled and the humbled being exalted appears often in Jesus parables and teachings. It's called the great reversal and its purpose is to make clear that God does not align God's self with money and power but rather with those who suffer as a result of having neither. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says the meek will inherit the earth. Not the rich, not the powerful. The meek. Later in Matthew he states clearly that God honors the hungry and the sick, the thirsty and the naked, the imprisoned and the forgotten. The last shall be first and the first shall be last! Jesus wants us to realize to the very core of who we are that it is not ever all about us. It is always about the other.

He makes this clear in today's parable from Luke when he turns to the host of the dinner – he told this at an actual dinner he had been invited to at someone's house – and tells him, “when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed because they cannot repay you.” In other words, you don't feed people just to entertain them or impress them. You feed people because they need to be fed, and you can do it. Is Jesus railing against dinner parties and holiday picnics here? Of course not! Jesus loved a good party as much as

the next person. Just think about the wedding in Cana or any of the many other stories about times he met with people over a meal. What Jesus is saying here is that you need to stop worrying about impressing people, about making a big deal about yourself, and put that effort into helping others who really need your help. What Jesus is talking about here is humility. You cannot follow me, he says, if you aren't willing to be humble. You can't follow me, if you're not willing to accept the worst seat at the table if that's what the situation requires.

So, on this Labor Day weekend, I hope you will think about Andrew Carnegie and Henry Frick, about Cornelius Vanderbilt and John D. Rockefeller but not with awe or outsized respect because their accomplishments would not exist without the ceaseless hard work, long days and mediocre pay of the men and women who worked for their railroads, sweated in their steel mills, and strained to wrangle gargantuan steel beams into tall buildings. Without the millions of hands and thousands of bodies who labored to build their empires, those empires would not exist. I'd like to end by sharing that this topic is near to my heart because I come from a steel family. My dad worked in the mills in the early part of his career and so did both my brothers. None of them would ever talk about it with me or my mom. I don't really know of anyone who worked at the blast furnaces who would talk about it when they got home. The blast furnaces in a steel mill are

like hell on earth because making raw coal into steel requires heat beyond what anyone can long endure. That's why they're called blast furnaces. And that's also why when my dad and my brothers would come home from the mill, they just wanted to forget their hours in a hell of human making. Take a shower, put on clean clothes, have a nice meal, relax a little, go to bed and forget. And then get up again the next day and do it again. That takes a special kind of courage, a special kind of grit and determination every bit as significant, even more so, than the likes of Carnegie and Frick and all the others. That's why I'd really love to be there when Jesus reminds them, it's not about you and it never was.

And, by the way, dear friends, it's not about you either. It's about God and what God is asking of you, of any of us, in any given moment. Now isn't that a humbling thought? It should be... Amen.