

The Foundation of the World

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship with Communion

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC

September 5, 2021 – Labor Day Weekend

Text: Matthew 25:31-46

Well, another Labor Day Weekend has come our way. We've been through a lot to get here but we made it! We've survived a summer that managed to be sunny, hot and steamy even as it was one of the wettest one in recent memory. And, really, two hurricanes? How ironic that the one that made landfall locally didn't do any more damage than the remnants of the one that made landfall in Louisiana and yet still dumped record-breaking rain locally. The weather is clearly totally crazy in every sense of the word. But, Labor Day arrives tomorrow, right on cue, bringing it with the September weather we all love even if it feels too soon to say goodbye to summer. Mums are on sale and pumpkin spice is everywhere and Clyde's Cider Mill opening up reminds us of all the reasons we do love fall around here. Most of us think of Labor Day weekend as the gateway to fall but that really isn't true. The first day of Fall isn't until September 22nd so technically there is a little bit of summer left. But, with schools open it just doesn't feel that way, whether we have kids in school or not.

I've always felt a certain affinity for Labor Day myself. Maybe it's because I always loved school and in Pennsylvania we seldom went back before the Tuesday after Labor Day. Maybe it's because I knew that my dad was an example of what Labor Day was all about. My dad was a "steel man" through and through having worked more than 40 years in the industry that gave my hometown of Pittsburgh, PA its nickname of the "Steel City." He started in the rolling mills as a clean-up guy long before I was born. With hard work and determination, he worked his way up the ranks in the mill and, thanks to the Steel Workers Union of which he as a proud member, he earned a good living for his family. There came a point when his talent and knowledge of the rolling processes brought him to the attention of management. That and a "night school degree" in metallurgical engineering made my dad's jump out of the mill possible, but I know it was

not an easy decision to make. When he left the mill, he also left the union behind, and that made him uneasy. He never doubted that the union had his back, that the union made it possible for him to provide for his growing family. But he wanted that shot at the white collar world so he accepted the promotion and began his next stint as a “steel man,” this time as a white collar engineer troubleshooting rolling issues with tin plate for his clients. These ranged from small companies like Marx Toys to behemoths like Heinz Foods and even Coca-Cola. My dad was well known and widely respected. He made a lot of money for US Steel, especially with several patents on products he engineered for those clients. Baby food jar lids? His design. Ring top soda cans? His design. Slinkys – remember them? His design. But his compensation from US Steel never changed as far as I know. No bonus for these inventions of his. No residuals either because US Steel owned the patents even though he did the work. And when he retired early because too many of his friends in his office were dying young from cancer in many forms, dad’s pension proved to be pitiful. Far less than he anticipated. He never said anything but I know he was disappointed, and even embarrassed. He had walked away from a union job to make a better living for himself and his family, or so he thought. But without the union covering his back, the promises of the company he devoted most of his adult life to meant nothing. There was always a loophole they could exploit when it came to insurance issues or even guaranteed cost of living raises to the pension. Each year his pension shrank. And after he died, his survivor benefits were almost negligible. If my mother had not owned her own business for many years, she would have been destitute.

So, why am I telling you this story about my dad on this Labor Day Weekend? And, for heaven’s sake, what does it have to do with the Parable of the Sheep and Goats from Matthew that is our text for this morning? Those, dear ones, are indeed legitimate questions so let me explain. Labor Day is, in fact, a recognition of the importance of working people – union people – in this country and around the world. It is a reminder that the work done by laborers in every field of endeavor matters. In fact, this labor

– this hard work – is the backbone on which the economy of the world operates. And we forget that far too often. We forget that without farm workers and truck drivers and road crews and cleaning folks and landscapers and CNA’s and dietary workers and servers and cooks – well, the list goes on and on – without these people, life just grinds to a stop. We found this out directly during Covid as companies and store shelves emptied. We’re experiencing it still as ongoing labor shortages in all these “on the ground” kind of jobs have been making the news for months. Restaurants have had to cut back hours because they can’t get enough cooks and servers. Nursing homes and hospitals are scrambling to have enough staff to function, in the midst of a resurgence of the epidemic no less. Teachers and other line school staff are also in short supply as older teachers retire and younger ones can’t handle the unrelenting stress of the profession. We’ve heard so much about the labor shortage that we’ve almost become numb to it and yet it is a profound situation revealing, I think, a major paradigm shift currently underway in our country and around the world. Dear ones, we are discovering that the folks who really make the world function each day are not the stockbrokers and bankers and CEO’s of multi-billion dollar corporations. I have heard absolutely no one lamenting the lack of stockbrokers in the last year. I have not heard one person expressing sympathy for a CEO or a college president or a car dealership owner for being overworked and underpaid. And yet, the folks who complain about slow service in restaurants or long check-out lines in stores are all too quick to complain about all those lazy people unwilling to work. Honestly, I don’t know anyone like that. Everyone I know who is able to work is working. So, what’s the deal?

Enter Jesus and his unique take on the economy as revealed in his parable of the sheep and goats. It’s called that because of the reference at the beginning to the “Son of Man” – Jesus – sitting on his throne and separating people, “like a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.” This agrarian metaphor means nothing to us modern folks but even we can grasp that this is about judgment. This is about Jesus deciding who has lived life as he taught and preached – and who has not. Who has loved God

with all that they are and all that they have and who has not. Who has loved the other as themselves and who has not. To those who have, Jesus says, “inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” This, dear ones, is one of the clearest, most profound and powerful lessons Jesus ever taught. Here he is saying unequivocally that God has always intended for people to take care of each other, without counting the cost. Who is in Jesus’ list of people destined for God’s eternal blessing? The list is right there and it’s clear – cooks and servers and dishwashers and grocery store workers who feed everyone from the richest to those on hunger’s front lines; plumbers and public works folks who keep the water flowing and potable; teachers and library workers and church folk and all those folks who are on the frontlines with strangers, making them feel welcome no matter who they are; retail workers, seamstresses and even cobblers making sure we have clothing to wear; nurses and CNA’s and pharmacy techs taking care of the sick; first responders like fire fighters and police and prison guards entrusted to find a way to care for the most impossibly difficult persons in our society. These are the people – these workers on the front lines of all our lives – whom God has destined to be blessed from “the foundation of the world!” Dear ones this is what Jesus says! Not me. This is all Jesus.

You will notice who is not on the list. CEO’s and the so-called titans of industry. Finance people of any and every kind. Stockbrokers. Corporate billionaires spending their money on their own rocket ships for personal space travel when people are hungry and homeless, sick and completely lost and alone. Nope. Jesus knew 2000 years ago that these kinds of people – the people who always come out on top, who always find a way to get theirs and the heck with everyone else – Jesus knew that not only did they not need his kind of blessing, they wouldn’t even know what it was. Well, at least they wouldn’t know until it was too late. That’s when they’ll finally think to ask, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or

thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” And they will mean it!! If they had known it was Jesus, of course they would have done something to help him! Geesh, they’re not stupid. And that’s when Jesus will look them in the eye and say to them very slowly, emphasizing every word, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” All those people you griped about being too lazy to work so they didn’t deserve any help from you, I was with them in that crowd and you refused to see me, Jesus said. Every time you looked the other way when water became too contaminated to drink safely in poor communities, you poisoned me, Jesus said. Every time you turned away a frightened refugee at the border because you didn’t think those people deserved to be here, that was me you turned away, Jesus said. Every time you threw away old clothes instead of giving them away because it was just easier, that was me who needed that coat, Jesus said. Every time you refused to get a vaccine or wear a mask to prevent the spread of Covid, that was me who got sick from your germs, Jesus said. Every time you sent a black man to prison and let a white man get probation for the exact same crime, that was me you locked up behind those bars, Jesus said.

In this powerful parable Jesus is calling out every single one of us where it hurts as he asks us point blank – do you live each day loving God and loving the other person, or not. From the foundation of the world, Jesus tells us, it has been the same story. Some people are part of the solution to the world’s problems and some people are not. In fact, too many people these days ARE the problem with their ugly prejudices and selfish attitudes, their commitment to “might makes right” and only they get to say what’s right. That is so wrong, Jesus says. And it has been since the foundation of the world. But, the good news is, it’s never too late to switch sides in this parable. It’s never too late to be the one who sees the God-given humanity in every person needing help and responds just because it’s the right thing to do. It’s never too late to feed the hungry or take care of the sick or welcome the stranger and the prisoner alike. It’s never too late to be the person God created you to be, the person God needs

you to be. But – here’s the thing – only you can make the change. Only you can move across the great divide separating the people who care and the people who blame and look away. From the foundation of the world it has ever been thus. The only question that matters for you this morning is – which side are you on? Amen.