

The Labor for Justice
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9/3/2017

Good morning and thank you for the invitation and for the suggestion that I talk about labor on the weekend that honors it.

As a former member of the Shared Ministry, I want to say thank you for keeping this church alive for the neighborhood.

I am aware that your move into the city was not without conflict.

Doing the right thing rarely is without conflict.

I continue to be in 1508 Market three mornings a week with the Common Ground Community Center and am on the board of the 501c.3, Gather The Spirit for Justice, which does the fund raising to keep the Center and the Saturday breakfasts running.

There has been a community center in this fellowship hall for over 40 yrs and Saturday breakfasts for about 15 years started by the Shared Ministry.

People in the neighborhood depend on having that safe and welcoming place to come to. Providing a safe and welcoming place is a labor of justice.

On behalf of the Shared Ministry thank you for keeping 1508 alive.

So back to this Labor Day Weekend message, the thinking behind the invitation was that since I had been a civil rights investigator for the state for 33 years--hired when 9--that I would have something to say about labor from a civil rights perspective. Indeed I do.

The title 'The Labor of Justice' came to me very quickly, and the more I thought about it, the more layers there were to that subject.

An obvious and crucial layer is the history of anti-discrimination law at a state and federal level. And yes, we need it at both a state and federal level.

When I worked for the PA Human Relations Commission, which enforces the state's anti-discrimination law, we often talked about what life was like for many Americans as they tried to get a job, go to school, eat in a restaurant or buy a home, before there were any civil rights protections.

While grateful that my family history does not contain barriers and violence because of our immutable characteristics, it is so disturbing, wrong, senseless that other families' histories are full of stories of barriers and violence because of their immutable characteristics.

All my ancestors had to do was work hard.

The story of how state and fed level came to be is full of extreme injustice on one hand and acts of courage, wisdom and perseverance on the other hand.

There were repeated efforts particularly during the 40's and 50's to get into law basic anti-discrimination protections.

You know the expression that the 1950's was an age of innocence....not for people of color or the LGBT community or for people with physical/mental disabilities or for the Jewish community, or for low income people or immigrants from just about anywhere.

The segregation and unequal treatment that continued after the Civil War into the 40's and 50's allowed some Americans, who look like me, to comfortably stay disconnected from tremendous hardships and indignities other people were experiencing.

I can think of times in my life when I have wanted an excuse to think I had no responsibility for the bias directed at others.

As in, look I'm not Black, it's not my issue. I'm not Muslim or Jewish or Sikh, it's not my issue. I'm not gay, I don't have a disability, it's not my issue.

This is where we need to acknowledge that cultural isolation certainly keeps us more comfortable by keeping us away from human difference...it also allows us to say "It's not my issue" when someone else is being harmed.

Cultural isolation keeps us smaller and less ethical people.

In addition to the daily denials and disrespect people were experiencing based on—let's start with skin color--there were also some major events that got the nation's attention on PA.

-On such event was the 1944 Philadelphia Transit Strike.

Keep in mind this was during WW II. The fed government had created the War Manpower Commission whose job it was to make sure domestic labor needs were being met during the war.

That meant that men of color and all women found jobs open to them that had not been before the war....

...but not in transportation jobs in Philadelphia, which employed over 11,000 men (only men), only about 500 of whom were AA, and they were limited to the most menial, most dangerous and lowest paid positions.

When the fed War Manpower Commission required that other positions be open to African American men, the transit authority began training 8 men of color to operate street cars.

The White employees responded by calling a strike that shut down over 3,000 street cars, subway cars and buses...which, of course, shut down the city and impacted much of the East Coast.

Pres Roosevelt sent in federal troops to accompany those strikers back to work..and then those soldiers had to remain and ride public transit to prevent violence against African American employees and residents.

It seemed like something that would happen in Alabama, but it happened in Pennsylvania.

That transit strike negatively affected many white people who had never before been impacted by the discrimination of others. It brought them to the table to begin looking at discrimination in American...an involvement perhaps motivated by self-interest...but they were finally at the table.

Also coming to the table for the first time were more white folks with good hearts who were impressed/shocked that soldiers needed to protect 8 Black men because those men were operating street cars.

Those new people at the table were joining African Americans and Jewish people who had been at the table for decades trying to convince gov't at any level that discrimination was wrong and harmful to the nation.

Pres Roosevelt proceeded to support efforts to study the problem (they were still studying the problem) and enact federal civil rights law.

And I need to note here, that it was at key times and places the Unitarian Church has been on the front lines...like marching with Dr. King across the Pettis Bridge into Montgomery, AL.

But it was not until 1964 that the US had a federal law designed to protect people from discrimination in employment based on their race, color, religion, national origin or gender.

And do you know how gender got in there? It was a last ditch amendment by the legislators who opposed it to make it fail.

Their thought was if the US had to give up one cheap labor market—men of color—no one was going to agree to give up the cheap labor of all women too.

But the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed. I was in 9th grade...and hoped that it meant the factory where my mother worked would stop having separate lists for men's jobs and women's jobs, which all paid less than the lowest paying men's job...but the trickle-down effect of that fed law took many years...and counting.

I also hoped that this new fed law protection of w in the work place would mean that my mother and all those other w would no longer experience sexual harassment on the job. That would take many, many more years...and counting.

And keep in mind that all those people who have labored for just law experienced severe retaliation for their efforts from employers, from unions, from co-workers, and sometimes even from law enforcement.

Meanwhile in PA it was in 1955 that the legislator and Gov Leader passed the PA Fair Employment Act which for the first time, made discrimination based on race, color or religion in employment illegal.

It had very little enforcement authority but it was a start. There were many holes in that law; some of those holes have been filled and some of which remain gaping.

Our state law evolved into the PA Human Relations Act and “prohibits” discrimination in housing, education and public accommodations (like stores and restaurants) as well as in employment, and the protected classes that originally only included race, color, and religion, now include N.O., ancestry, age over 40, gender, handicap/disability and having a GED instead of a high school diploma.

You notice LGBT status is not on the list so, as they say, you can get married on Sunday in PA and get fired on Monday when your boss learns the gender of your spouse.

The labor of justice needs all of us to regularly contacting our legislators to include in anti-discrimination law those persons who are treated unfairly.

So where are we now? The PA Human Relations Commission has been cut in half in recent years, and we have a supportive Governor but he has no money.

And the federal government administration...well, you know. And you know about the overt hostility some now feel free to exhibit.

Regardless of what is or is not happening in D.C. right now, because of the nation’s rapidly changing demographics, more and more children are growing up seeing that human difference is not something to be feared or avoided but is natural and normal and good.

That’s the good news.

The history of the development of civil rights law is one layer of the labor for justice.

I became aware of another layer shortly after I moved to Harrisburg at 20...a nice little church girl straight from the farm in norther PA.

I grew up in a farming valley where everyone looked like me and most folks went to the Methodist Church.

My family went back in that valley at least 5 generations, and I grew up hearing, I think it was my Uncle Dave say, “The Van Dykes have been in this valley since Jesus was in junior high.” We felt we had dibs on that valley...it belonged to us and we belonged to it.

And when outsiders came into our valley, it was OK as long as they acted like us, and thought like us, and believed like us and looked like us, because if they didn't and they came into our valley and stayed, they would be bringing in a problem.

We had no understanding that the problem lived there in us, just the presence of difference brought it to the surface.

So when I moved to Harrisburg, thinking ‘I did not have a racist bone in my body,’ I was so surprised and dismayed to find I was full of the stuff...I was full of biases about people I had never met.

The most helpful definition of prejudice I've ever heard is this: Prejudice is the belief that we know a great deal about someone tho we do not know them...and what's more we think we do not need to get to know them as an individual because we see all we need to see when they walk in the door to come to an automatic list of assumptions about their strengths, their weakness, their interests and their value.

At the tender age of 20 I had to do a lot of searching to figure out how all those biases got into me.

I realized that I had grown up hearing a lot of jokes—as I suspect many of you did--jokes about black people and gay people and Jewish people, about immigrants and about the Polish and intellectual disabilities (moron jokes). Those jokes taught me that those other people were less than I and were greedy or stupid or lazy or violent...and to be avoided.

And then there were the dumb woman jokes which taught me that we were perceived to be/expected to be less than the other half of creation.

I heard good church folks telling those jokes.

Jokes remain powerful teaching tools.

I also realized that my public school education taught me extremely little about people of color or women or religious or ethnic minorities.

So at the age of 20 I realized I could not say, “I am not prejudiced.” I could only say “I don't want it in me” and commit myself to the lifetime task of cleaning it out.

I came to the table to labor for justice as a spiritual matter. I thought it was my job as a person of faith.

I have a dear friend who is agnostic. Nobody works for peace and justice harder than she does, and she does it just because it's the right thing to do.

However we come to the table, it's the right way.

The labor of justice still needs our participation in strengthening civil rights law...

and the labor of justice will always need us to be cleaning out bias from our hearts and minds.

Peace be with you.