

September 5, 2021| Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Proverbs 22:1-2,8-9,22-23

OLD SOUTH CHURCH in BOSTON

Thomas A. Mitchell, *Seminarian*

9 to 5

In 1973, a collective of women, almost all of whom were clerical workers, all of whom were tired of sexual harassment, tired of earning less than their male peers, despite doing the same job, and tired of facing the reality that their careers could be held back by a bad boss or by a glass ceiling came together and formed a union. That union was called Boston9to5. Their work inspired the film 9 to 5, which starred Jane Fonda, Lily Tomlin, and Dolly Parton. It was also the inspiration for Parton's song *9 to 5*.

Parton's song opens with a bouncy and inviting first verse:

Tumble outta bed and stumble to the kitchen

Pour myself a cup of ambition

Yawn and stretchin and try to come to life...

Out on the streets, the traffic starts jumpin'

With folks like me on the job from 9 to 5

But for all that bounce and invitation, the chorus quickly tells us that something less positive is going on:

Working 9 to 5, what a way to make a living

Barely gettin' by, it's all taking and no giving

They just use your mind and they never give you credit...

Want to move ahead, but the boss won't seem to let me.

The union was formed in 1973 and those lyrics were written in 1981. And yet, the same song could be written today. Albeit with the slight edit of the working day, which for many people is no longer 9 to 5.

Hospitality and other service workers frequently work truncated shifts that last from 9-2 or 2-7, or 6 until close. And, in many cases, even if they aren't scheduled to work, they're told to remain available in case they need to be called in.

More recently, The advent of new technology and our society's increasing demand for instant gratification of every need, coupled with rising costs of basic necessities like food and shelter, has encouraged the rise of the so-called "gig economy."

Personal cars become taxi-replacements for anywhere from a few hours to the majority of a day, some Americans leave their "formal jobs," and then hop in the car to start delivering food or groceries. In the past year, many of us have worked from home, and so the traditional barriers between work and life, like commuting and physically being in a different location, have been

erased. Some of us now find ourselves answering emails at 8pm or sending a quick text to a work colleague right after dinner.

It seems that in spite of all the advancements made in working conditions, in pay, and in hiring practices, we are again allowing labor to consume our lives. That consumption, however, is not a burden that is evenly shared.

Last November, California voters passed Proposition 22, a ballot initiative that overturned AB 5, a major workers rights law that required companies to classify their gig workers as employees, with minimum wage, overtime and workers compensation.¹ The campaign in support of Proposition 22 was the most expensive ballot measure in US history, as companies poured 200 million dollars into ads to encourage support for it.

This past December, we learned that managers at a Tyson plant in Iowa organized a “cash buy-in, winner take all betting pool for supervisors and managers to wager how many employees would test positive for COVID-19.”²

And all along the west Coast, as wildfires raged, governors ordered residents to stay indoors. And those same governors sent out fire fighting units, composed of prisoners, who were earning roughly \$2 an hour for their work.

In those same states, as temperatures soared beyond 100 degrees this past month, farm workers went to work. So perhaps it isn't surprising that farm workers die from heatstroke at a rate nearly 20 times greater than other civilian jobs in the US.³ Moreover, many of those farmworkers, who are often immigrants and on the lowest rung of the socioeconomic ladder, are paid per piece, rather than per hour. And they don't receive overtime pay, a reality made possible by the Fair Labor Standards Act, which established the 40 hour work week and banned “oppressive child labor,” but that also expressly exempted farm labor from its protections, because agriculture was seen as a profession for Black Americans.

In each of the stories I've offered, there is a clear trend line: those who endure the worst of labor are the marginalized, the poor, and the oppressed. Moreover, one can see, in real time, the decisions that are made that actively oppress the poor, the overworked, and the underappreciated to enrich corporations and shareholders, at the expense of workers. Not only does our Scripture this morning admonish this behavior, but it provides a clear consequence-- no matter what riches one accumulates, if that accumulation is built upon the backs of an exploited or an impoverished people, then the oppressor will ultimately suffer loss.

It is easy to overlook that declaration. Our society constantly tells us that the accumulation of riches is a noble and just pursuit. A pursuit that all of us should actively participate in. And yet, here sits this proverb suggesting that a society organized in such a manner may certainly

¹ <https://www.latimes.com/business/story/2021-08-20/prop-22-unconstitutional>

² <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/12/16/947275866/tyson-foods-fires-7-plant-managers-over-betting-ring-on-workers-getting-covid-19>

³ https://crosscut.com/environment/2021/08/heat-and-smoke-protections-wa-farmworkers-may-fall-short?utm_content=buffer67ed5&utm_medium=social&utm_source=crosscut-twitter&utm_campaign=buffer

accumulate riches in the short-term, while staggering towards loss. This is not much different than the question “What does it profit a man to gain the whole world, yet lose his soul.”

What might it mean to focus on the accumulation of earthly possessions, and to do so by harming God’s creation?

Proverbs is often seen as simply a collection of common sense sayings, as quick and easy statements to read and move on from. But my friends, in its entirety proverbs is a call. A call to live a life that is pleasing to God. A call for self-reflection. Because a close reading of these texts reveal the reality that it is indeed possible to find ourselves pursuing the (folly v wisdom?)

Having said all of this, I want to be sure that we all note the beautiful call in the middle of today’s Scripture reading:

Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor.

The original Hebrew, says that “The one who has a good eye, shall be blessed.” “Good eye” meaning kind and generous. The generosity here isn’t in sharing finances, though it is certainly good to do so, as one is able. The generosity here is in sharing bread. An act that we encounter throughout the Bible, as an act of coming together, of bonding with one another, of awaiting the stillness of God in the presence of a simple meal. An act that reminds us that we all come from the earth, and that we will all return to it.

Going forward, what might it mean to share bread in this moment. How big will the table be? Who will be invited?

These are the questions Proverbs leads us to ponder, particularly as we think about the relationship between those who are oppressed and those who have been enriched through that oppression.

As Parton’s ode to workers fades, one line stands out: There’s a better life, and you think about it don’t you?

Let’s not just think about it. Let’s actively bring that life into being.

Amen.

