

Inherent Worth and the Living Wage

A Homily by the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon

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We are worth more.

Two weeks ago, organizers from the national movement of striking fast food workers came to visit the justice-oriented clergy group that I recently helped found here in Columbia.

They told us about a call to national action – one day strikes across the country on August 29 to raise awareness about the indignity of poverty wages and the injustice of highly profitable corporations paying them. They told us they'd heard from workers here in Columbia who wanted to stand up.

Then they showed us footage of strike actions in Kansas City the month before, and it was a slogan on the back of the workers' t-shirts that finally hit me in the heart.

The shirts said: We are worth more.

The video ended, and I spoke immediately. "I'm in."

The organizers had lots of facts to share with us –

that the average fastfood worker in today's economy is between the ages of 27 and 35 and has at least one child to support –

that fast food corporations are pocketing record profits while paying their workers poverty wages that taxpayers are forced to supplement through burgeoning public assistance programs—

that low wage workers across many industries make only half what would be considered a basic living wage that would allow them to pay rent, afford utilities and healthcare, and put good, healthy food on the table.

The facts were certainly compelling.

But it was that simple statement on the back of a t-shirt that called to my spirit and my Unitarian Universalist faith.

We are worth more.

The injustices of our current economic system are overwhelming. Clear solutions to the growing wealth gap are not close at hand. One could feel paralyzed by the

interlocking issues of poverty wages, educational disadvantage, hopelessness, violence, and more.

But here was something I could do. I could stand beside low-wage workers, and with the weight of my faith and the power of community behind me, I could say: We believe that you are worth more.

I could join with them as they declared their own worth and dignity and assure them that we've got their back.

So... I was in. 100%.

And with the courage of at least 20 workers, the creative partnership of a coalition of community supporters, the participation of 7 local clergy, and the enthusiastic work of our own social action team, Columbia quickly pulled together something amazing.

On a day when 60 or more cities across the country stood up and spoke out for the economic dignity of all workers and all work, Columbia was one of the smallest municipalities adding our voice to that nation-wide clarion call. Small but mighty.

The day began with a breakfast and rally here at the church, hosted with warm radical welcome by members of our social action team. Over bagels and juice, I talked with a man who told me about his daughters, ages 4 and 5, who love Disney princesses and Xbox spaceship games, and who sounded full of spunk and spirit. He told me he worked two different fast food jobs to try and provide for his girls, and some days, he didn't even get to see them, leaving the house before they woke up and returning home after their bedtime. He told me he was standing up today for his daughters.

Talk about human dignity, right? That man was dignified.

Economic models developed by scholars at MIT put a living wage for an adult with one child at \$16.47 an hour, with full time hours. The median fast food worker wage in Columbia is \$8.53 an hour, and few fast food workers are able to cobble together full-time hours. When we pay hard working people only half of what it takes for them to survive, what are we telling them about their worth and dignity?

After our first public witness at Hardee's, we spent an hour in the air-conditioning, drinking water and cooling off, and making signs for the next action. I talked with a woman who had made a sign saying: "Jesus was a Low Wage Worker." Her three daughters were with her, the baby strapped to her chest all day as we moved from action to action. She told me she worked full time at minimum wage, but she couldn't afford an apartment. She and her girls were staying with a friend. Sleeping on a couch and the floor. That's not right, she said.

Talk about human dignity, huh? That woman was dignified.

So many low wage workers have to turn to public assistance, that a study has shown that a single Wal-Mart store, paying its employees anywhere from \$7.35-\$9 an hour, will cost taxpayers \$900,000 in necessary public assistance programs for those same workers. One store, \$900,000 needed in food stamps, subsidized housing, Medicaid, and more. What does that say about Wal-Mart's attitude to human worth and dignity?

For our second action, we moved to the Taco Bell on Nifong. I held up the woman's sign; the one that said "Jesus was a Low Wage Worker." There, as we chanted "Hey, Hey, Ho, Ho, Poverty Wages have got to go," a man began berating us - "Go home, burger flippers. My wife makes \$17 an hour as a nurse, and you want \$15 dollars to flip a burger? Get a real job!"

We responded with a new chant: "Nurses need a raise! Nurses need a raise!"

This is an argument you see a lot from skilled workers of many fields who are making below or barely a living wage themselves. Why should less-skilled workers make a higher wage when I went through years of training to barely scrape by?

And I can see why this feels like a zero sum game to some middle class workers.

Currently one percent of our population holds 40 percent of our country's wealth. The bottom 80% share only 7% of the nation's wealth, so of course it feels like a lot of people are scrabbling over a relatively small pot of money. Right now, we are.

And we must remember that these corporate CEOs at the top are good and worthy people too, but I can just imagine how very safe their vast fortunes feel when those who make \$17 and those who make \$8 are quibbling over better pay while ignoring the staggering, exponential gap between themselves and that top 1%, who make up to \$8,000 an hour.

There are economic arguments about how wages for working people across the board have stayed flat for decades while inflation marches on. Economic arguments for why raising our lowest wages grows the economy and helps move wages up across the board.

But the true response that I have for the man at Taco Bell, *and* for the CEOs is theological. We are all in this together, bound up in one single garment of destiny. We rise and fall together, 100% of us, and all of our spirits are impoverished by a system that keeps millions of people in poverty.

Furthermore, human worth and dignity is not a zero sum game. Your worth does not diminish mine. Rather, dignity builds upon dignity in abundance, and when we live that truth, we are ALL WORTH MORE.

Our connection yields our calling – bound together, we *must* proclaim the dignity of our neighbor.

But our connection to one another is also where we find our power. At the end of the strike day, workers and supporters alike returned here to the church for lunch. We were hot, sweaty, tired, and hungry, but the room was alive with energy. As we shared our thoughts on the experience a leader from the Taco Bell workers stood up and gave us a word.

“I don’t know when I’ve been in a room with so many different kinds of people. Across faith and ethnicity and so many other things, we stood together today, and it was awesome. I am feeling joyful and powerful, and next time, it will only get bigger.”

I thought, “Preach!”

When we join together across divides, we are living what people of Christian faith have called the Kingdom of Heaven, here on Earth.

When we proclaim the inherent worth of our neighbors and ourselves, we are embodying what Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called the Beloved Community.

On Thursday I caught a glimpse of the promised land. I saw what it means to heal our world. Nobody got a raise (yet). Nobody got a union (yet). But we stood together, dignified, worthy, and connected, and I do believe, it made all the difference.