

“Love Works”

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9; Mark 7:1-8; 14-15, 21-23

Part VI of VI in the sermon series “Then and Now”

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, Columbus Ohio, 15th Sunday after Pentecost, September 1, 2024, dedicated to Charlie and Mike Kneer and their family, to Jim and Gail Lowe, who have dedicated themselves to care for the poor throughout their lifetime, to all my union family members and pro-union family members through the generations who have worked, loved and fought for justice, to the memory of Rick Sayre and always to the glory of God!

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock, and our salvation.
Amen.*

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On September 2, 1975, the teachers in the North Penn School District in Lansdale, PA went on strike. My mother took a sign, headed to the picket line and held her ground. In our conservative community, Unions were not okay, and strikes were really not okay. As the teachers took to the streets, parents headed there as well – shouting and cursing at the teachers while they walked the line.

I was beginning my senior year when the teachers struck. In solidarity with my mother and her colleagues, I wanted to march as well. But, mom asked me to stay home. So, I did support work for families behind the scenes.

One evening, mom came home shaken by the counter protesters. During the day, one man, a father of one of her students, came up and spit on her because, in his words, “she wasn’t worthy to be teaching his son.” His son, as it turns out, had had all sorts of trouble in school. My mom was one teacher who stood beside him and encouraged him. She started to cry. I had not seen my mother cry since the day we received the call her father died of cancer – eight years earlier. She heartbroken that a parent of a child she had fought for would be so cruel to her for simply standing up for justice and equity.

I learned a life lesson that day – people will spit on you and lie about you for doing the right thing and standing up for justice. It was one of many lessons of love and justice I learned from my union family through the years. We are a union strong family. I am proud of my family members who have fought for workers’ rights across a hundred years and more.

In the Fall of 1984, I helped organize Yale Divinity School students and faculty to stand outside the gates on the picket lines with clerical workers seeking fair wages and benefits. In Connecticut, Yale University paid the lowest wages to clerical workers anywhere in higher education. The workers won – but it took four months of bitter fight with President Bart Giamatti and the university to do it.

Again, in February 2011, I found myself outside the gates again – this time outside the Ohio Statehouse with thousands of police, firefighters, public school teachers, and nurses. Over 360,000 state workers were about to have their rights to collectively bargain stripped away and I organized other pastors, rabbis, and imams to speak out on their behalf. The assault on Ohio’s public employees’ rights came from the newly elected governor and legislature. Swept into office in November 2010, Governor John Kasich and an ultra-conservative leadership sought to abolish a 35-year collective bargaining agreement for all unionized state employees. Although 70% of Ohioans supported the right to collective bargaining, the assault on public sector employees had begun.

Against this radically exclusive legislation came daily protests on the statehouse lawn and in the capital's atrium and rotunda. Tens of thousands of people showed up. As a religious leader in Ohio, I organized clergy statewide and we joined the protests – listening carefully, reading the legislation carefully and in time speaking out publicly.

On March 8, 2011, as the governor gave his “State of the State” address inside the statehouse, I addressed over 5,000 people outside the statehouse. At the exact same moment the governor was speaking inside, I was with the people of Ohio outside. Our messages were demonstrably different. The governor stood with the rich and spoke for policies which are anti-union and made no apologies for where he stood and for whom he spoke. I was there to challenge his understanding of collective bargaining and speak up for a different idea of the collective spirit of faith and labor in our state.

On that clear cold March day I said: *“What I love about Ohioans is that we work out our problems. We come together and work together and face the tough times. We find a way through. That is what collective bargaining is all about. It is not about greed – as some people say. It is about fairness and equity. It is all about working things out for the good of all people. It means finding what is best for the common good. It means making sacrifices on both sides and finding a way forward. And it works. It has worked for Ohio for a long time. This is not the time to throw out what works in a state where over half a million people are out of work.”*

What has changed in the spirit of Ohio – in the tenor of our times? Where have the moderation and the collective spirit of doing the right thing gone? How have we reached this point?

Mr. Kasich, listen to the people of Ohio. Listen and you will hear the voices of the men and women who instruct our children, protect our streets, and put out the fires in our burning buildings. They give their lives to us. They risk their lives for us. They are the Symphony of Hope. Their instruments are tuned to service and

praise of God. Listen to them. They are the deacons in our churches. They are the “mitzvoth” in our synagogues. They are prayer partners in our mosques.

There are 100’s of thousands in this Symphony of Hope! As we hear them cry we know that the citizens of this fine state also hear them. Students in our high schools, colleges and universities are clicking-on their computer search engines and their searches are taking them out of Ohio. Even though their teachers want them to stay, they have begun to lose hope and look elsewhere to find work as future teachers, firefighters, and police.

Mr. Kasich, please listen. You have faith. But, we have faith, too. We are out here. We will not go away. We are standing out here with the statute of a former Republican Governor and President, William McKinley. If you won’t listen to us – listen to him. At the base of his statue it reads: “Let us ever remember that our interest is in concord, not conflict, and that our real eminence rests in the victories of peace, not those of war. Our earnest prayer is that God will graciously vouchsafe prosperity, happiness, and peace to all our neighbors, and like blessings to all the peoples and powers of earth.”

In the end, the people of Ohio turned out in record numbers to defeat Issue #2 by a vote of 61-39%. The very next day, conservative leaders gathered to begin their next challenge to workers in Ohio – “the right to work” initiative.

Labor and economic questions related to them are ever-pressing on us in Ohio. The over-employed work long hours in six and seven day work weeks with little to no additional compensation. The under-employed scramble to piece together two and three jobs with no benefits and no perks. The unemployed are out of work; some are churning through savings, others are sinking into debt, but all who unemployed are struggling to survive. We are blessed at this time to have our unemployment rate at a 50 year low. That is great news. But, when workers struggle, we must stand with them and support them.

Some would say the church has no role to play on issues dealing with labor and employers. I could not disagree more. When it comes to the assault on laborers, I feel strongly that I must speak out. I am undaunted in this belief.

Dr. Washington Gladden delivered these words on the same statehouse steps 100 years before me. They ring true in my heart.

He said, “... *The labor question is in part an economic question, and all economic questions are fundamentally religious questions. (In fact), there are no purely spiritual interests, since spiritual forces all incarnate themselves in the facts of every-day life, and can only be known as they are there manifested. ... There is indeed danger that the Church will make mistakes in dealing with such questions, but that the greatest of all mistakes is in ignoring them. ... There are no souls that are more in need of saving than the souls getting entangled in the materialisms that undervalue humankind; and there are no people who need moral guidance more than those who are grappling with the manifold phases of the labor question.*”

The late German theologian, Dorothee Soelle, working with themes from Sigmund Freud, authored a little book many years ago called *To Love and to Work* (Fortress, 1984). Dr. Freud believed that the definition of a sane person is one who is able to balance a life of work and love. How simple and true.

Dr. Soelle wrote: “*My book is an attempt to affirm our being created and becoming creators, being liberated and becoming agents of liberation, being loved and becoming lovers*” (p. 157). She believed that work is not in essence God’s curse (as some interpreters would have us believe in Genesis), but rather as God’s intent for human liberation. Freud, Soelle, and the Holy Scriptures are right: to work and to love are central to our humanization. Now we need to find a way for grace and love to also be and always be central in our humanization, too.

To work and to love. I pray that you find balance in your work/love life. I pray that Love will always work for you. Love is the best way to work to reconcile the broken relationships between us. Amen.

