

# Bread and Roses

Labor Day Sunday ~ September 6, 2009

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## Proverbs 22: 1 – 2, 8 – 9, 22 – 23

A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold. The rich and the poor have this in common: God is the maker of them all. Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of anger will fail. Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor.

Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate; for God pleads their cause and despoils of life those who despoil them.

## James 2: 14 – 17

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has not works, is dead.

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Bread and Roses. That was the plea of the women workers who went on strike in the nearby city of Lawrence, Massachusetts, almost 100 years ago. The actual date was on January 12, 1912. At that time, workers were earning a mere \$6.00 a week. When Congress passed a law limiting the work week for 56 hours to only 54, the mill owners cut the wages. This put many of the workers below starvation level. Most of Lawrence’s 30,000 textile workers walked off the job and stayed out for nine weeks in a harsh winter.

The name of the strike came from women who carried banners and sang “Give us bread but give us roses” as they picketed the mills. Their slogan came from their need to have not only a living wage, but also the leisure to enjoy the beauty of life: a mere 54 hour work week and a living wage.

Let’s listen to the song “Bread and Roses,” a song which comes from the title of a poem written by James Oppenheim in 1912 about the Lawrence textile strike. Music was composed by Mimi Farina in 1976 and she and her sister, Joan Baez, performed this a-capella duet in California for a 1977 Bread and Roses fundraising concert.

### Song Lyrics

As we go marching, marching, in the beauty of the day,  
A million darkened kitchens, a thousand mill lofts gray,  
Are touched with all the radiance that a sudden sun discloses,  
For the people hear us singing: Bread and Roses! Bread and Roses!

As we go marching, marching, we battle too for men,

For they are women's children, and we mother them again.  
Our lives shall not be sweated from birth until life closes;  
Hearts starve as well as bodies; give us bread, but give us roses.

As we go marching, marching, unnumbered women dead  
Go crying through our singing their ancient call for bread.  
Small art and love and beauty their drudging spirits knew.  
Yes, it is bread we fight for, but we fight for roses too.

As we go marching, marching, we bring the greater days,  
The rising of the women means the rising of the race.  
No more the drudge and idler, ten that toil where one reposes,  
But a sharing of life's glories: Bread and roses! Bread and roses!

Ah, yes. The women understood the essence of labor.  
“Our lives shall not be sweated from birth until life closes;  
Hearts starve as well as bodies; give us bread, but give us roses.”

And their cries were heard in the halls of Congress. Public opinion and a Congressional investigation forced the mill owners to give in to most of the strikers' demands.

If you're interested in more information about the Bread and Roses Strike of 1912, I encourage you to visit Lawrence Heritage State Park and see the strike exhibit and the videos. Tomorrow, on Labor Day, Lawrence is celebrating their annual Bread and Roses Heritage Festival on the Common in downtown Lawrence from noon to 7:00 pm. The story continues to be told and celebrated.

So on this Labor Day weekend, let's reflect for just a few minutes on what Bread and Roses has to teach us about our labors, our work, whether it be in our homes or outside of our homes. Pause for a moment and consider your daily labor. Where is the bread and where are the roses in your daily efforts? For those who are actively employed, reflect for a moment on whether or not you believe that you receive fair wages for the work that you do? Or do you feel that you should be taking home more bread? Is there time in your work week for you to smell the roses? To spend time with family and friends? Or does your work totally consume your life? Can you do a better job of balancing the bread and the roses? For those of you who are retired, the income that you receive from your pension or Social Security or investments, represents years of labor. The wages were your bread, but did you recognize the roses? And now that you are retired, do you appreciate the roses, the leisure time that your years of labor now afford you?

I like to think that God is in both the bread and the roses. Often, it's easier to find God in the roses, during those times when we are with family or friends or enjoying vacation days or weekend leisure. But on this Labor Day Sunday, I want to suggest that God is also in the bread, in the hard day to day schedule of the work-a-day world.

Each of us can reflect theologically on how we can find God in our daily, working life.(1) Whether it is making the bed or doing the dishes, building houses or surveying property; mowing the lawn or tending the garden; answering e mails or balancing budgets; commuting to work or taking a coffee break; preparing the classroom for a new school year or discussing work performance with your supervisor; or.... you fill in the tasks, the labor, that fill your day....however you spend your

time, can you open yourself to the possibility of God meeting you in the workplace? Can you recognize God's spirit there? Maybe it's when someone pays you a compliment; or maybe it's when you sense the inherent goodness of another colleague; or maybe it's when you get so angry or upset at something that has happened that you find yourself praying! I encourage you to watch for signs of God's spirit in your daily labors.

Another way to make work more spiritual is to become aware of your presuppositions about your work. Discern the values, motivations and dispositions that underpin your approach to work. Some of these may surprise you! You might realize that you earn as much as you really need and that job satisfaction is more important than chasing promotions and pay raises. Alternately, you might realize that you are too ambitious and ruthless in your pursuit of power and money and you may want to revisit your personal goals and make them more in alignment with Christ's commandment to love God and neighbor as you love yourself.

We all can pray about our work life. We can simply ask for God to help us in our every day work. We can pray for patience and tolerance and can even offer thanks for a tolerable or even a great place of work.

Most importantly, we can remember that God is present always. Have faith that God is not absent from your workplace – be it at home or outside of your home. William Blake, an 18<sup>th</sup> century a British poet, wrote during the industrial revolution. He asks a pertinent question in his poem entitled “Jerusalem.”

And did the Countenance Divine  
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?  
And was Jerusalem builded here  
Among these dark Satanic Mills? (2)

The answer of faith is that yes, God was present then in the “dark Satanic Mills” even as God remains present in the contemporary workplace, no matter what we think of that place. There is no separating God out of our daily life. God isn't just to be found here in the sanctuary on a Sunday morning. God companions us day and night, inviting us to recognize the encouragement and the inspiration and hope and love that God gives us wherever we find ourselves.

Bread and Roses. On this Labor Day Sunday I give thanks for the women of the Bread and Roses Strike of 1912. Not only did they remind us of the important balance of work and leisure, they also remind us of the important issues of subsistence wages and labor's long struggle for gains which many of us now take for granted. Yes, may we join their song “Give us bread, but give us roses,” and may we seek to find our God in both the bread and the roses.

Amen and Amen.

(1)Greg Heylin's article “Spirituality and Work: Opening to the Story of the Other,” found in the journal *Presence* (Vo. 15, No. 3, September 2009) helped to inform my theological reflections on work.

(2)p. 26, *Presence*.