

Labor Day

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“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” – Genesis 1.

How many values and opinions, judgments and conclusions, disagreements, fights, and wars have been derived from the first chapter of the book of Genesis? As we know, there are people so invested in the story that they believe that it is the literal truth, that the universe was created in six days. There’s even a Creation Museum in Kentucky just south of Cincinnati dedicated to this vision of the cosmos. They maintain this view despite the well-established understanding that the Bible doesn’t contain what we call “facts,” but rather myths and metaphors artfully crafted to convey subtler, deeper, multi-layered meanings of the sort that defy classification as anything other than “wisdom.”

Let’s take a look at the highlights of first chapter of Genesis. It begins with the beginning, saying,

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light and there was morning—the first day.

And God said, “Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water.” So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so. God called the vault “sky.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the second day.

And God said, “Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.” And it was so. God called the dry ground “land,” and the gathered waters he called “seas.” And God saw that it was good. Then God said, “Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds.” And it was so. And

God saw that it was good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the third day.

And God said, “Let there be lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark sacred times, and days and years, and let them be lights in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth.” And it was so. And there was evening, and there was morning—the fourth day.

² And God said, “Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky.” So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living thing with which the water teems and that moves about in it, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the fifth day.

And God said, “Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: the livestock, the creatures that move along the ground, and the wild animals, each according to its kind.” And it was so. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.

Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.

By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

If you're anything like me, these verses come with a lot of baggage attached, but I'd like to lighten the load a little bit. Let's take a look at what's actually in here that was new at the time; let's ask the questions, "What were they trying to say that was different from other creation stories at the time?"

This clears things up considerably. You know, "God created heaven and the earth, the sun and the moon, water and land, creatures of all kinds, blah blah, woof woof." This was standard creation boilerplate during the second millennium B.C.E. They were necessary to establish the authority of your story. If you didn't say these things people wouldn't believe anything you said next. But a couple of parts stand out as unique. In this story, God creates humankind in God's image and likeness and puts them in charge. This was radical during an age when rulers were seen as being authorized and empowered by their unique connection to the divine. Genesis represents a radical humanist perspective that all people were equally divine and equally in charge.

The other radically different element was that the creation was divided into six days with a seventh day of rest, the creation of something entirely new: the Sabbath Day – a day off.

What else would have been more important to a people made up of escaped slaves? They'd been lorded over by a divine Pharaoh who forced them to labor long and hard every day for generation after generation without any hope of rest this side of the grave. So the first thing they did was to craft a creation story that made them as important as the Pharaoh, and that gave them a day off from work.

So the roots of the ancient Hebrew people are the beginning of the labor movement: they created the six-day work week at a time when such things required a divine mandate for their enforcement. On the seventh day God rested and set aside that day for all to rest.

Pretty radical for a bunch of escaped slaves.

After all, it's been said that the Pharaoh was a wealthy jobs-creator. So why did he choose to go with the community organizer instead? Because, unlike the Pharaoh's, Moses' vision was one of the inherent worth and dignity of every person – a humanist vision that led to community more than to kingdom, a vision that respected labor and demanded a day of rest for all.

It was this vision that inspired Karl Marx, who I consider to be a modern-day prophet in the Old Testament tradition, despite his atheist convictions. He pointed out that, since the dawn of the industrial revolution, capital had become a demonic power with its own interests and needs that had nothing to do with the needs and values of human beings. His call to revolution had little success for many reasons, but the ideas he introduced changed forever the terms of discourse surrounding labor. He reintroduced the idea that workers were the source of the wealth enjoyed by the few and that justice required a fairer system of distribution.

Between the works of Marx and the novels of Dickens, the ideas of justice in the face of workplace exploitation spread throughout the world. Sometimes Marx's voice dominated, with, "Workers of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains." These ideas found their greatest expression in the Paris Commune of 1871 and the Russian revolution.

These forays into violent revolution were the exception rather than the rule, though. But the ideas of fairness for workers grew steadily in influence. The excesses of what has been called the "Gilded Age" of the 1870's and 1880's created an awareness of the incredible gulf between the class of ostentatious wealth and the slum-dwelling poor workers, many of them immigrants. There was a small middle-class, consisting mostly of factory managers. The mark of the middle class was home ownership and the ability to send their children to school. The children of the poor, however, had to work – often for long hours for very little pay.

But a growing awareness of this inequality led to a shift toward collective values and the progressive era of social consciousness and mutual responsibility. This shift created the environment that made the emergence of trade unions possible. People began to expect fairness for workers beyond a threadbare

minimum of survival. This expectation was expressed in the phrase, “bread and roses,” insisting that workers needed more than bread alone. The roses represented the humane aspect of life that could include health, leisure, and time enough to appreciate life’s beauty beyond mere survival.

The first national labor union was formed in Philadelphia in 1869. The Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor was also unique in that it united skilled workers with unskilled laborers. Its main goal was the eight-hour workday, and those who joined were a mixture of workers dedicated to fairness and revolutionary anarchists who wanted to fight. This came to a head on May 1, 1886, when the Knights of Labor called for a national strike. About 300,000 workers participated, with the largest gathering in Chicago where 40,000 turned out. The demonstrations turned violent. One striker was killed, bombs were thrown, killing seven police officers and injuring about sixty others. Seven strikers were arrested for murder and four were executed. The movement lived on, but this was the end for the Knights of Labor which was absorbed into the newly emerging American Federation of Labor.

The first Labor Day celebration took place in New York City on September 5, 1882, proposed by Matthew McGuire, secretary of the Central Labor Union, after seeing a similar celebration in Toronto, Canada. Over the next decade, thirty states endorsed the holiday, beginning with Oregon.

The story of labor in the United States is full of struggle with victories and defeats for all sides. Many owners relied on tactics of brutally violent suppression, often employing Pinkerton detectives as bullies and thugs. A major shift took place as a result of the Pullman Railroad strike of 1894, led by Eugene Debs, when federal troops and U.S. Marshals killed 13 strikers, injuring many others, including widespread property damage. President Grover Cleveland realized that he had gone too far in his efforts to control the labor movement and reconciled with the leaders of the striking workers. Six days after the strike’s end, the U.S. Congress unanimously approved Labor Day as a national holiday celebrating the American worker.

The story of labor is one of continual struggle for dignity and respect for workers, including the movement to limit child labor. The very intensity of the

conflict and its ongoing nature shows us that the issues of labor, humanity and respect for the working men and women are never fully resolved. Given the opportunity, the lure of profit tends to tempt business to minimize the rewards they share with their employees, especially in times of anxiety.

Nowadays we tend to look to government as the guarantors of workers' rights. But we should never forget that every single advance in the law was the result of pressures brought about by labor unions. And now even the government's role is being challenged. Long-standing workplace rights, along with environmental protections, are being characterized as "job-killing regulations."

Our society has fallen into a pattern of perceiving resources as belonging to whoever can get and use them without regard for the consequences to anyone but themselves. Coal, oil, natural gas, timber are all seen as extractable by right. We seem to be on a trend of seeing human labor in the very same way, that we owe no more to the working men and women whose labor drives our economy than we do to the coal mines we dig or the oil wells we drill. We just want to use them up as cheaply as possible.

Our Pledge of Allegiance ends with the lines, "with liberty and justice for all." Can we really say that with integrity when so many are suffering in abject poverty while so few are enjoying a greater gap between the rich and poor since the Gilded Age?

Or how about placing an asterisk to that phrase? We now need a footnote for the exceptions, for undocumented immigrants to whom we no longer extend the basic rights of our constitution? They are workers, too. We need their labor to support our lifestyle. Where is the union to fight for their liberty and justice?

The struggle for human dignity is never over. It has been going on since before the book of Genesis was written and we are still called to engage it today. Our values require it and our consciences demand it. It takes heart and it takes courage. Are we up to the task?

May it be so.