

**“Just Wisdom”****Proverbs 22.1–2, 8–9, 22–23****The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 6 September 2009**

It is Labor Day weekend, and I imagine that for most Americans, this national holiday signifies three things: a three-day weekend, the end of summer, and big sales on consumer goods. There is, however, a more serious dimension to Labor Day, which is to honor the women and men in our nation who work for a living, contributing to the overall welfare of our nation.

It has been a holiday recognized since it was started by the state of Oregon in 1887 and within a year other states – Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, and Colorado – followed suit. The 1880s were a time of great ferment in the labor movement, with violence occurring sporadically as workers tried to unionize and act collectively. It may surprise you that Colorado was one of the first states to recognize Labor Day, but in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, hard-rock and coal mining were a substantial part of Colorado's economy. And about the time Plymouth was founded in 1903, so-called the Colorado Labor Wars started breaking out in such mining towns as Cripple Creek, Leadville, and Ludlow. On several occasions, the governor called out the National Guard to protect miners from Pinkerton men and vigilantes hired by the mining interests. But, enough of history...and back to the biblical wisdom literature in today lectionary text, which has connections to Labor Day.

I wonder we, each of us, hears these words today: “The rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all.” “Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity... Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor.” “Do not rob the poor... for the Lord pleads their cause.”

If we look at these proverbs – statements of wisdom from the Hebrew scriptures – how do we see them in the context of our own lives and the lives of the working poor around us. How does God speak through this ancient text?

Most of us in this congregation are people with financial means. Now, you may not feel like it – I know that sometimes I don't – but by global and historical comparison, our standard of living is nothing short of posh. You may own a home (or two), a car (or two), have a college degree (or two). And perhaps you don't often see the working poor. Who does your dishes when you eat dinner at Austin's? Who picks the lettuce you buy it at Whole Foods? Who sews the denim of your new Levis? Who cleans the bathrooms you use? Somebody's labor is making all of those things possible, and they certainly aren't getting rich doing it. Perhaps you see them come in for an interview with the Homelessness Prevention Initiative at Plymouth each Monday, but for the most part, they aren't at the League of Women Voters' meetings, volunteering at the Colorado Welcome Center, or attending health education events at the Aspen Club. And you may not recognize the working poor who are worshipping with you on a Sunday morning, but they are keeping the faith among us.



In recent weeks, I've been asked by various members of Plymouth not to talk about politics from the pulpit, and on the other hand, I've also been encouraged to take a stand supporting a single-payer option for national healthcare reform. I respect that each person here is able to make an intelligent, informed decision about what type of healthcare reform they support. And I'm aware of the responsibility this pulpit holds. I appreciate that you listen to what I have to say, and I invite you to engage your faith in thinking about your own conclusions.

I'm going to share a couple of stories with you that I hope might shed the light of your faith on the national healthcare debate. So, let's return to scripture: "Do not rob the poor ... because they Lord pleads their cause." "Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor." I hope you see the connection I'm building between physical sustenance we receive in bread and physical sustenance we receive through access to quality healthcare. And if you are willing to take that step, then also to see that "sharing bread" involves more than just flour and water.

Many of you knew John Collier. You came to his funeral in May and celebrated his life. You gave thanks for all that John did for Plymouth, whether it was editing your monthly newsletter or organizing the all-church retreat or running a yard sale or setting up the annual art show. And some of you were touched not so much by what John did, but by who he was, bringing that huge, infectious smile into Plymouth.

John had done various things during his life for work, and his last job was with a storage facility between Fort Collins and Loveland, where he worked full-time. It wasn't a high-power job with a big employer, and as such, it didn't come with health benefits. For awhile that may not have seemed like a big deal to John, but then he needed surgery, which was a financial disaster for him. And the next year, John discovered that he had lung cancer. Facing the prospect of a life-threatening illness without health insurance certainly doesn't inspire the kind of confidence that is needed to fight the good fight. And so, John being John, he put his trust in something far greater than the almighty American healthcare machine. John relied on God to get him through. God does a lot of things, but she doesn't write checks to hospitals or oncologists.

Thankfully, John had healthcare providers who were willing to waive fees and rely upon whatever reimbursement would come their way through the Colorado Indigent Care Program, funded by federal and state funds. That certainly didn't cover the cost of John's care provided by hospitals, physicians, surgeons, chemotherapy centers, and hospice. Those costs are spread among the rest of us who do have private insurance and who pay taxes. So, there is already a way in which we are funding some of those who work full-time, but don't have health insurance.

Does God really plead the cause of the poor, or are we just supposed to smile nicely and nod when we hear that proverb? Do you ever wonder if God could use a hand in pleading the cause of the poor? Do you ever wonder, WWJI – Who Would Jesus Insure?

And how about generosity? Those of us who are generous are blessed, because we share our bread with the poor? I don't know about you, but I don't really like to pay taxes. But, I would be willing to share a larger portion of my income with the federal government if I knew that they were helping to provide health coverage for the working poor.

Healthcare coverage for everyone in this country is a radical change, and it represents a shift in how the basic economic justice available to working poor families – it's not one of the charity band-aids that makes "us" feel better. It creates structural changes that give the working poor a fighting chance to have a better life.

There are lots of thoughts about whether a Japanese or a Canadian or a French model will work best, and it's not my intention to convince you which option is best. What I'm hoping to do is to stimulate your **faith** and your thinking, and to get you to bring your own internal Christian dialogue into play as you formulate a response to the national debate.

The other story I'd like to share with you is an experience I had a few weeks back driving through the intersection of College Avenue and Mulberry Street on Saturday at noon. There were protesters of all four corners of the street, waving signs and chanting slogans. And there was an elderly man, physically unable to stand and protest, so he was

driving his pickup truck around the block again and again. In the bed of his beat-up pickup he flew the Gadsden flag – a rattlesnake on a yellow field with the words, “Don’t tread on me.” And he also displayed a spray-painted sign on a piece of plywood that said, “Leave me alone.”

I had some thoughts about this man and his messages. Whenever I see the Gadsden flag, I also think of Benjamin Franklin’s political cartoon of a rattlesnake divided into part representing the individual American colonies. Though it has echoes of the Gadsden flag, its message is different. Franklin put the words, “Join or Die” at the bottom. While the spirit of rugged individualism is certainly part of the American landscape, so is the tradition of coming together for a common cause. When that man displayed a sign that said, “Leave me alone,” he was stating the case for his individualism, but I wonder what he would make of Dr. Franklin’s call for collectivism.

As he drove round and round the block, I noticed that this elderly man was wearing a nasal cannula, so he must have been experiencing some serious health condition that required him to receive supplemental oxygen. There is no way to be sure, but chances are pretty good that as someone over the age of 65, he was receiving healthcare coverage through the federal government’s Medicare program. I wanted to ask him what would happen if we, the American taxpaying public, heeded his request to “leave him alone.” Would he die without our assistance? Would he lose any financial stability he has trying to pay healthcare bills? Given that, does he really want us all to just “leave him alone?”

Does God call us to just leave each other alone? Or does God call us to be a blessing to one another, to connect with one another, and to give a damn about each other?

As we receive communion this morning, I invite you to take the words of the proverb to heart: “Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor.” And I invite you to ask who is sharing bread with you and at whose table you are dining. Amen.