

A Gracious Invitation

Heb 13: 1-8, 15-16

Lk 14: 1, 7-14

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Heb 13: 1-8

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?" Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

Lk 14: 1, 7-14

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely. When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Just outside of the Seattle Art Museum, the 48 foot tall *Hammering Man* is busy. The 20,000 pound, tall black silhouette has a motorized hammering arm which will move smoothly and meditatively up and down at a rate of 4 times per minute. The *Hammering Man* is a worker and it celebrates the worker. He or she is the village craftsman, the construction worker, the fisherman, the computer operator, the teacher, the farmer, the migrant worker, the janitor, the factory worker or the grocery store clerk, or any of the people who produce the commodities and services on which we depend every day. The silhouette *Hammering Man* stands alone yet is a symbol of solidarity.

The sculpture has been situated so that the many pedestrians and drivers moving up and down First Avenue can enjoy the animated form while contemplating the meaning of the *Hammering Man* within their own lives.

The silhouette sculpture is set on a timer and rests during evening and early morning hours. But for years he hammered every day, no weekends off, no holidays off, no vacation time. What was meant to be a tribute to those who labor instead became a statement about the *oppression* of working people. On Labor Day in 1993, art-warfare guerrillas attached a 700-pound ball-and-chain to the *Hammering Man*, in protest of his harsh working conditions. Since that day, he has rested each Labor Day.

Labor Day is a holiday dedicated to the social and economic achievements of American workers; a yearly national tribute to the contributions workers have made to the strength, prosperity and well-being of our country. It is also a day for special events, cookouts and the unofficial end-of-summer. It is a day that we tend to observe by *not* doing what we are honoring.

It is good to step away from what fills our days, to step away from what tends to define who we are, and to reflect upon our God-given gifts for the work that we are called to do. So as we pause, rest and play away from what we do it is good to be mindful of how our work --- paid or as a volunteer--- touches others' lives every day. It is humbling to realize that we may be entertaining angels unawares as Jesus calls us to extend a gracious invitation of hospitality beyond those who are just like us, beyond those who may reciprocate.

In your work, you know immediately who is around you, and the impact of your time, efforts and commitment to them. Yet there are ripples and ever widening ripples of what you do and who it touches and what happens to them because of it. We will never know completely who benefitted from our work, from the labor of our hands, from a lesson we taught, from words that we wrote, from a decision we made, or from a service we provided. And that should be a humbling thought.

Also as we pause, rest and play away from our work it is good be mindful of those whose work touches our lives every day, especially those who labor for little compensation or benefits and yet provide the most basic, the most essential, needs for others.

Do we know about the store clerk who bags our groceries and then works another full-time minimum wage job to support his family?

Do we know about the single mother supporting her children and herself while making less money than a man in that same position?

Can we imagine the immigrant factory workers, day laborers, and hotel cleaning staff who provide for the needs of others while risking an ICE raid?

What do we know about the farmhands who grew our food, the ranchers who raised the cattle, or the migrants who picked the fruits and vegetables?

What do we know about the people who make our clothes, build our cars, clean our buildings, or provide the daily physical care for nursing home residents?

What do we know about how they are treated? What dangers they face as they work, or what wages they receive?

Many people see their work as a means to an end a path from one paycheck to the next. Work is where they are, not always where they had hoped or planned or dreamed to be, but rather through circumstances it is what happened to them instead.

Jesus calls us to invite the poor, crippled, lame and blind to our banquet, to the feast of enough, the feast of welcome, to our American banquet of fair wages and safe working conditions. These are the people who Jesus honors as distinguished guests at the banquet. This is who Jesus honors as we are all welcome at his table. Can we offer the gracious invitation of fair and equal wages, safe working conditions, and good benefits to all to care for themselves and their families? Can we extend generous hospitality to those poor in material things but rich in work ethics, to those crippled by situations that have left them unable to pursue the education to achieve the career they had hoped for, to the lame who struggle to find meaningful and rewarding work due to physical limits or mental illness, and to the blind who have lost sight of ever achieving the American dream?

Julie Polter, in an article entitled ‘Grateful for the Hands that Labor’, suggests “Take anything you use every day: a shirt, your computer, your corn flakes. Think about all the people who designed it, mined or grew the raw ingredients in it, molded or sewed the pieces, and transported it. I suggest this not as a sentimental exercise, but as holy discipline. Thinking about the things we have or the services we enjoy does not bring justice to the people who provide them, but by remembering these people with gratitude, and remembering God, who is the source of all things, in that gratitude, can give us the energy to pursue that justice.”

Justice, energized by gratitude, blessed with our spiritual gifts, calls us on Labor Day to recognize and prayerfully respond to the workplace injustices that endanger or impoverish those who are employed under those conditions, just as sculptor Jonathan Borofsky intended in his creation of the *Hammering Man*.

In our rest and in our play at this Labor Day, let us hold in the spirit of prayer those who struggle for right working conditions, fair pay, and just treatment, and let us be in humble appreciation for what we give and receive by our work. Amen.