

Expectations of Fair Treatment
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet
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As I stated at the very beginning of this service, I am pleased that so many of you made it a point to be here today. You could have chosen, as so many people do on the Labor Day weekend, to be making the most of what is typically considered the last long weekend of summer. But instead of preparing to have friends and family over for a meal cooked on the grill, or being off camping, hiking, or fishing, you folks decided to come hear me share my thoughts related to expectations of fair treatment. With a clear awareness of what you could have been doing instead, I want you to know just how grateful I am for your presence here this morning. You have made my day.

Many of you have probably already figured out what the title of my sermon is about. Yes, the title is related to Labor Day and what led to its establishment as a national holiday, but it is about much more than that. Before going into the “much more than that” stuff though, it would be good to start with how tomorrow became a holiday in the first place. The tradition in this country of workers having a day off began on September 5, 1882 in New York City, when 10,000 workers took the day off without pay to march from City Hall to Union Square. That is considered by many to be the first “Labor Day” parade in the United States.

In the 1800’s there were no laws related to how employers were to treat workers. It was common for laborers to work 12 hour days, seven days a week, to earn enough to afford basic necessities. These laborers had none of what we now consider basic benefits. Back then there was no such thing as a paid day off. If you didn’t work one day you didn’t get paid. And if you missed more than a few days you were out of a job. Employers had a large pool of people to draw from to fill an empty work slot. Children as young as 5 or 6 worked in factories, mills and mines across the country, often for only a fraction of what adult laborers were paid. Many of the jobs these laborers had were hazardous to their health and sometimes to their life. It is widely agreed today that the kind of working conditions back then were neither reasonable nor fair.

The labor movement and labor unions were born out of the kinds of working conditions I just mentioned. Laborers began organizing with the hope and expectation of fair treatment. They organized for better wages and safer working conditions. They organized expecting and demanding to be treated as human beings with worth and dignity, not objects to be used and then discarded.

The establishment of Labor Day as a federal holiday occurred 125 years ago, in 1894. Some historians claim that the holiday was created in an attempt to salve the wounds of those in the labor movement. The wounds were related to the 1894 union strike against the Pullman Palace Car Company in Chicago. President Grover Cleveland dispatched U.S. Army troops in an unsuccessful attempt to end the strike. More than a dozen union members lost their lives in that strike.

It could seem today that the fair treatment of workers is an issue of the distant past. Over the past 125 years a great deal of progress has been made in regards to how employers are allowed to treat an employee. We have the Federal Labor Standards Act of 1938 that established both a minimum wage and rules regarding the employment of

children. We have the Occupational Health and Safety Act of 1970. The enactment of laws such as these can be traced back to the expectations of laborers who organized to demand better treatment, to demand fair treatment in their place of work.

Yet in spite of laws such as these, there are still significant numbers of workers who are not being treated in a reasonable or fair manner. I would offer as an example people who are identified in the Federal Labor Standards Act as “tipped employees.” Many people who work in restaurants fall into this category. Today the federal minimum wage for such employees is \$2.13 an hour. It has been \$2.13 an hour for 25 years. And employers are not required to provide these “tipped employees” with benefits that many people take for granted—benefits such as paid sick days, regular and dependable hours, or health insurance. If you want to know more about how such workers are treated, I encourage you to read the book *Behind the Kitchen Door*, which was a UUA “common read” shortly after it was published in 2013.

I could easily go into detail about some of the ways certain workers continue to be treated unfairly but there are other things that I need to speak to today. First, I want to state that I have personally never belonged to a union. Yet even though I was never a union member, at my first professional job I benefited from the collective bargaining done by the union that represented my co-workers. Several of my family members belong or have belonged to unions including my father. Another family member was a union representative at the factory he worked in for several years.

Family members and friends who have been union members have frequently told me of the positive contributions unions have made in their lives. Some other family members, however, point out aspects of labor unions that they see as negative. I am well aware of the dark side of labor unions, having grown up in Michigan where the auto industry was king of the hill during much of the 20th century. Labor unions have run amuck many times. Labor unions and their leaders have engaged in abuses of power, including corruption and involvement with organized crime. Of course labor unions aren't alone in this. I can think of a significant number of companies that have engaged in such behaviors, companies such as Purdue Pharma and Enron. Political parties and their members have also engaged in such behaviors. I won't mention any names here since I don't want the Fellowship to get in trouble with the IRS.

Returning now to labor unions and their leadership, some of you may have heard of Jimmy Hoffa, the one-time President of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters union. He spent 4 years in prison for jury tampering, attempted bribery and fraud. While in prison, Hoffa resigned as union President as part of a deal that gained him a pardon from President Richard Nixon in 1971. Did I mention that some politicians have engaged in corrupt behavior? Hoffa disappeared from Oakland County, Michigan in July of 1975 and it is widely believed he was murdered. I am also well aware of union demands that went beyond what I, and I imagine many of you, consider to be “fair” treatment. For example, in order to end a strike, some auto companies agreed to a union demand to keep workers on the payroll for years even though the workers did no work. All that was required of the workers was to show up and remain at the workplace for their allotted hours.

James Sherk, who is currently a White House Labor Advisor, has made numerous assertions about the harm that labor unions do. As a Research Fellow for the Heritage Foundation, Sherk wrote an article in 2009 asserting that labor unions benefit their members but hurt consumers. He claims in the article that unions decrease the number of

jobs available, thus harming those who are denied job opportunities. And he further states that unions retard economic growth and slow the rate of recovery from an economic downturn.

I am not an economist nor do I claim any expertise when it comes to the benefits or detriments of labor unions. That said, I believe it is important for me to consider both how laborers are treated as well as how our economic system is affected by organized labor movements.

Now I want to shift gears and move to a topic that has gotten a significant amount of attention the last few years, the topic of income inequality. Some of you may be aware that in 2017 the delegates at the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association voted to adopt a Congregational Study/Action Issue titled Escalating Economic Inequality. If you aren't familiar with this Congregational Study/Action Issue, I encourage you to go to the UUA website to read about it. Here is just a short excerpt of what you will find, and I quote. "Challenging extreme inequality locally and globally is a moral imperative. As a pragmatic faith we are committed to change economic and social systems with a goal of equitable outcomes of life, dignity and wellbeing experienced by all." I would point out that the word "equitable" that is included in this statement is not the same as the word "fair" that I have in the title of this sermon.

At this point you might be wondering why I have raised the issue of economic inequality here. I raise this issue because there is a very clear connection between economic inequality and the strength of unions. The Economic Policy Institute has pointed out, and rightly so, that "to a remarkable extent" economic inequality in the U.S. has corresponded to the rise and fall of union membership. Current union membership in this country is approximately half what it was in 1983. At least part of the reason for the decline has been a concerted effort to restrict and even dismantle organized labor.

I want to offer a couple of examples here. The first example involves an attempt to dismantle a particular union. The U.S. Justice Department is currently attempting to decertify the union that represents federal immigration judges. The issue in this situation isn't about pay. It is about a politics. I could do an entire sermon on that topic.

The second example involves states such as Wisconsin that have passed "right to work" laws. Such laws prevent unions from requiring workers who are not members from having to pay for the benefits the union provides them. Benefits include higher wages, better working conditions and benefit packages, and even union representation in some situations. Let's consider the idea of what is fair here. Is it fair that a person should reap the benefits associated with working at a business where the union does the bargaining and then that person is free from any responsibility to share the cost that union members incur?

Let's return now to income inequality. In the last 40 years the average worker's pay has increased just under 12%. The average pay for CEO's has increased 940%. Here is some quick math on those numbers, 940 divided by 12 is 78. Have CEO's become 78 times more valuable than workers in the past 40 years? Is the difference in pay reasonable? Is it fair?

Today more than one quarter of the workers in this country earn less than \$10 an hour. That puts them below the threshold for the federal poverty level. In case you don't fit in the category of the one quarter of workers I just mentioned, let me add some statistics that include all of us. Data from 2015 indicates that the top 10% of people in the U.S. earn

more than nine times as much as the bottom 90%. Here the question is, is a person in the top 10% really worth 9 times the worth of 9 people who aren't in that top tier? I want to point out here that I am not implying that pay should be equal. I am asking us to consider what is reasonable and fair.

As I was growing up both of my parents did their best to help me learn how to be caring, considerate and compassionate. They made it a point to teach me to imagine myself in another person's shoes. Their goal, I am sure, was to help me learn to be fair in my dealings with others. To this day I seek to live what they taught me. I recognize that my actions are not always fair. And more than that, I have come to realize that life isn't fair. Even though life isn't fair I continue to strive to be as respectful of another's needs, interests and worth as I am capable of being. That is the best I can do. I would like to believe that everyone I encounter has a similar value system. I would like to believe that but I know that isn't the case. Everyone of us has the capacity to be inconsiderate, self-centered, self-serving, or even greedy. When we let those tendencies in ourselves go unchecked, the effects can do significant damage, not just to another but to ourselves as well.

So as we celebrate the Labor Day holiday tomorrow, I would suggest that each of us take a few moments to contemplate what "fair treatment" means to us. From my own reflections on the issue of "fairness" I will say that I don't believe there are any simple or absolute answers. What is and isn't "fair" is complicated. "Fair" is definitely not "equal." I would recommend that as you reflect on what being "fair" means, you also consider our Seven Principles, especially Principles 1, 2 and 6. As you do so, it is my hope that you will come to a deeper understanding of how the inherent worth and dignity of another matters to you. During your time of contemplation may you recall situations where the values of dignity and justice in human relations have shown up in your day-to-day life. Each day of our lives we have the ability to make this world just a bit more fair. If everyone decided to work at that, I am certain life would be better, not just for the few, but for everyone.

So may it be.