

## ...With Dignity and Justice for All!

[Text - James 2:1-8; 15-17]

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Labor Day Weekend is a good time for us American citizens to reflect on the Divine call for “Dignity and Justice for All!” Throughout the Scriptures, people who desire to faithfully follow the Holy One are instructed to show equal respect for *all* people - regardless of religion or nationality, social or economic status. Yet throughout our lives, our culture teaches us to make judgements about others, based on their backgrounds, or the way they look, or talk, or even what they wear. Early on, you and I are schooled in the science of pegging people *according* to their school or neighborhood, race or religion, job or lack thereof. Therefore, making judgments based on people’s outward appearances [and our own internal biases], is an easy trap into which we can fall. People do have observable differences, yet you and I are called to regard all people equally, and to treat each person with the same respect, dignity, and fairness that we ourselves desire.

The prophetic call in both the Old and New Testaments affirms the value and the basic human rights of all people, particularly the poor and the vulnerable, the alienated and the lowly. Disparity between the way God’s people treat the rich and powerful, versus the poor and powerless is a recurring Biblical concern. Widows and orphans, the displaced and disadvantaged are clearly important to the Holy One. And just as God hears the cries of the oppressed Israelites in Egypt, the Holy One continues to hear the cries of the poor and oppressed today. So while Jesus’ ministry and message addresses rich and poor alike, he advocates most passionately for people on the fringes of religious, social, and economic circles.

The United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries uses a marvelous phrase to remind us of Jesus’ connection with and concern for the poor and for people who work in low-wage jobs: “*Jesus was a low-wage worker!*” Jesus *was* a low-wage worker! He didn’t get LeBron James’ big bucks for his Slam-dunk Sermon on the Mount! He

didn't collect Cleveland Clinic-level fees for healing the lepers and the lame. Jesus didn't own a house or land, no stocks, bonds, or other valuable commodities. The only property he owned was the robe he wore, which was taken-away with a toss of the dice, as he died upon a criminal's cross. A superficial judgment would put Jesus on the lowest level of human society. Yet you and I know his true worth - his intrinsic and infinite value! In the Divine Realm, the lowly are raised-up and the high and mighty are humbled - not to create a new imbalance, but to bring the entire Human Family into harmony.

In the United States, and around the world, the gap between the rich and the poor continues to grow ever wider. Unemployment, and underemployment, remains a chronic problem - often due to flawed corporate policies and hiring schemes that keep workers at part-time hours to avoid paying them benefits. In the U.S. alone, some 45 million people live in poverty, and another 60 million have income levels below what is generally considered "adequate". Yet while millions continue to struggle, the United States remains an extremely wealthy country. Over the past 40 years as wages for many have stagnated or even decreased, our economy as a whole has continued to grow. But when the benefits of that prosperity goes primarily or exclusively to making the outrageously rich even *richer*, the end result bears no resemblance to the harmonious and wholesome society which the Holy One envisions for us all.

Many poor people *do* work extremely hard, but they earn too little to break-away from the cycle of poverty. And this problem is compounded when many of society's rich and politically powerful view poor people as being less valuable, less deserving, and less industrious than *they* are. "If the poor don't wanna be losers, they should just work harder and make more money. Trust me, it's that simple! I pulled myself up by my bootstraps. [Of course it didn't hurt that my dad gave me a million dollar pair of boots to get started]" As this morning's Readings remind us, economic justice isn't just some abstract political talking-point; it is a core component of our Faith, which deserves our attention *and* our action.

Whether we are aware or not, every day, you and I encounter people who are hurting economically. They wait on us in restaurants and stores; they take care of our children and our aging parents; they clean our offices and our houses; some even live in the houses next-door. And while our society may want to make these vulnerable people seem invisible, or completely responsible for their plight, our Faith calls for us to see them, to show compassion for them, and to stand-up for them and with them. This isn't about being Politically Correct; it's about being passionately Christ-like.