

Labor Day

By the Rev. Rebecca Clancy

If you asked Americans what Labor Day represented, I'd wager most would say the end of summer. Few, I think, would think to connect Labor Day with the Labor Movement. But Labor Day is indeed connected with the Labor movement, and if we want to probe the significance of Labor Day for Christians, we must consider it in that context.

Labor Day was in fact the *culmination* of the Labor Movement. It was founded as a tribute to American workers in recognition of their social and economic advances – advances gained through dangerous and determined struggle – struggle for a living wage, struggle for the right to organize, struggle for a two day weekend, struggle against sweat shops and child labor... Labor Day, you could say then, was founded to mark the triumph of economic justice.

But the triumph of economic justice tends to be short lived. The forces of greed tend to galvanize and assault it. And these tendencies are perennial, as our Old Testament lesson indicates.

It was David who was the first real king of the nation of Israel. His predecessor Saul had been anointed king, but he was not the stuff of it. He failed to bring the nation into being. He left the people of Israel defeated at the hands of their enemies. But David *was* the stuff of it. David took up from that place of defeat and brought the nation into being. He

delivered the people of Israel the nation that had been promised to them by God through Abraham and Moses.

And the nation of Israel under David marked the pinnacle of the whole history of Israel, the time of Israel's greatest glory even to this day, for it was glory based not merely upon nationhood but too upon righteousness. This was because David knew the nation of Israel to be a nation under God and himself to be a king under God. This allowed him to govern with justice and decency and restraint. And all the people prospered.

And so it was with his son Solomon, but only for a time; only for a short time. Solomon inherited the throne from his father. He wasn't charged with bringing the nation into being. That his father did for him. And so, he took up the charge to make the great nation greater, but not greater in godly terms. Solomon took up the charge to make the nation greater in worldly terms, and so justice and decency and restraint were abandoned as impediments.

More specifically, Solomon undertook to make the nation greater through the construction of magnificent buildings. He is best known for building the temple, but what few know is that he also rebuilt the palace. His father's palace wasn't adequate for him, so he built a palace that dwarfed his father's, that dwarfed even the temple he had built. It had to be that enormous because he had acquired for himself 1,000 wives and had to keep them in royal style. And to accomplish building projects such as these, Solomon conscripted forced labor gangs. He all but enslaved the people, the immigrants first and

then the natural born citizens. Legend even has it that he sold people back into Egyptian slavery in exchange for horses.

But the worst was yet to come. Upon Solomon's death, his son Rehoboam inherited the throne. The people hoped it would signal respite, but it signaled anything but. At the time of his coronation the people approached him, as we heard in our Old Testament lesson. They said to him, "Your father made our yoke heavy. Now therefore lighten the hard service of your father and his heavy yoke that he placed on us, and we will serve you." Rehoboam sought the council on the matter and was advised that the people spoke wisely. But he disliked that advice, and so continued to seek council until he found advice to suit his inclination – which was to make their yoke even heavier. The result was the succession of the ten north tribes of Israel from the nation, which created two petty nations that soon became the pickings of empires.

Yes, our Old Testament lesson confirms that it is perennially true that the forces of greed tend to galvanize and assault the triumph of economic justice, and it confirms too what we may well learn in our own time – that the defeat of economic justice leads swiftly to ruin.

But in fact, we don't have to look as far back as our Old Testament lesson to confirm that it is perennially true that the forces of greed tend to galvanize and assault the triumph of economic justice. We can see it today in what followed the triumph of economic justice

won by the Labor Movement. The forces of greed found a way around its back through globalization.

And the forces of greed have diversified. The statistics are downright shameful. The gap between rich and poor has so widened that it now gapes. The richest 10% of the population owns 75% of the wealth, the greatest disparity since the Great Depression. CEO's of large companies now earn 365 times the average worker. That means that CEO's make in one day what it takes the average worker a year to make. The minimum wage was just increased, but it was the first increase in ten years, and did not keep pace with the cost of living so that in real terms the minimum wage now stands 7% lower than it was ten years ago. And for every dollar of white wealth, people of color possess but fifteen cents.

And now significance of Labor Day for Christians becomes clear. If we *as Christians* want to mark Labor Day rightly, then we must do so by advancing the cause of economic justice in our day. We must carry forward in our day the struggle of our forebears. For Jesus Christ has given clear expression that his cause is and ever will be with the least of his brothers and sisters. Our cause must be with them too. Amen.