

Labor Day Reflection

Genesis 3:19

Not only was our 16th president adept at citing scripture to underscore his points, it could be argued that Abraham Lincoln read scripture through the lens of his own experience as a worker. In light of his unsurpassed eloquence, we sometimes forget that, early on in his career, he was known as “the rail-splitter.” It is perhaps because of this acquaintance with physical labor that Lincoln’s take on Genesis 3:19 is so strikingly different from conventional and even scholarly interpretations.

God speaks in Genesis 3:19, telling Adam and Eve what awaits them beyond the gates of the garden:

By the sweat of your brow
you will eat your food
until you return to the ground,
since from it you were taken;
for dust you are
and to dust you will return.

The traditional view of this passage is one of work as punishment for the sin of disobedience: “by the sweat of your brow/you will eat your food.” Lincoln, however, did not view it as the description of a punishment but rather as a moral imperative: the food you eat is to be the result of your own work, not someone else’s.

His interpretation of this passage was not an incidental observation made in passing, but can be found in many of his speeches, letters, and reported conversations. Time after time, Lincoln stands with workers against those who would benefit from their labor without just compensation. It is this core belief that serves to undergird his opposition to slavery: you shall not live by the sweat of others.

Lincoln’s life experience of hardship led him to read scripture from the perspective of a worker, and it transformed our nation. His opposition to slavery was a logical extension of his commitment to worker rights.

Now imagine someone else reading scripture. Not a person who has risen to Lincoln’s stature, but an immigrant, waiting this very evening in Altar, Mexico, to begin the dangerous desert crossing to what she hopes will be work, just wages, and a new and better life. Imagine reading these selections from Deuteronomy 26 through the eyes and from the experience of such a person:

My father was a wandering Aramaean
and he went down into Egypt with a few
people...and became a great nation...but
the Egyptians mistreated us and made us
suffer, putting us to hard labor. Then we
cried out to the Lord...so the Lord brought
us out of Egypt...and brought us to this
place and gave us this land, a land flowing
with milk and honey.

Not everyone has the poverty-stricken background of an Abraham Lincoln or the unknown woman crossing the desert. But we all have the capacity to imagine, to put ourselves in someone else’s place. Such identification is part of what makes us human. And so I invite you to pick up the texts sacred to your faith. You don’t have to pick out an obvious passage that deals directly with economic justice or worker rights. Read any passage, but do so through the lens of a disenfranchised person – an immigrant; a person who has just lost their job and perhaps their house. See what they see. Feel what they feel. That is the beginning of the kind of solidarity that can transform the world.

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