



First Congregational Church (UCC) of Ashfield
429 Main Street – Ashfield MA 01330
Creating Community, Welcoming All

August 22, 2021 “Do Not Rob the Poor” Rev. David Jones

I remember at one of my very first real jobs, I was working on what they called the ‘notcher’ machine in a small plant that manufactured pallets for shipping. I was too inexperienced to operate the machine, so instead I was on the receiving end. My more senior co-worker would load the prepared wood into the machine, the machine would put its little notches into the wood, and I would literally stand there with my arms out and take the notched pieces, three at a time, turn and stack them onto a small wheeled platform, and then turn back to the machine to grab the next three pieces, stack them, and on and on, until I piled up the newly notched wood about six feet high and maybe three or four feet wide. Then I’d signal to my co-worker to pause the machine, and I’d very gently push on the stack of wood I’d just made, and it would roll just a little bit, a couple of feet maybe, where it would bump into a stopper. Then another worker in the operation would drive his forklift over to my stack, pick it up, and off it would go. Once cleared, I’d pull the little platform back to me, and my co-worker and I would repeat the process. I did that for eight hours a day, five days a week, and every one of those nights I’d be in bed asleep by about 8:30.

In theory, employees were supposed to move around a little, work at different machines, to help protect our bodies from being in the same position for too long. In practice, I was very good at this part of the operation, and my co-worker and I would get a small bonus if we hit and exceeded certain production targets. So I did this job almost everyday. But one day, lost a little in the pleasant mindlessness of my task, I signalled to my coworker the stack was complete before it was. I gently pushed it over for the forklift to come back much too soon. Since the forklift driver was nowhere in sight, I decided I could correct my error. I walked around the stack and gave it a little shove back toward the machine, so I could build it up a little higher. Problem solved. Except it wasn’t. Because the little platform was only designed to be pushed with a heavy stack of wood on it in one direction--the direction of the stopper.

A second after I shoved it back in the wrong direction, the whole stack of notched wood went tumbling. Thankfully no one, including myself, was injured.

In the past, we often talked about these kinds of places when we talked about labor and unions--workplaces that tended to be dominated by men. Thankfully this has begun to change. Now such workplaces are more diverse, and now we also give more thought to the labor of nurses, teachers, and service workers working in fast food or in grocery stores. Sadly I would say men at least continue to mostly overlook child care as a form of work, and house care as work.

But fewer young men are making that mistake these days, if only because young people can’t afford to. Since the Great Recession in 2008, millennials are having children at a dramatically lower rate than previous generations. There has been something of a birth-strike going on, according to one economics professor at Wellesley (<https://www.cnbc.com/2021/05/18/older-millennials-delayed-families-but-the-pandemic-made-kids-more-uncertain.html>), because it is so hard to imagine staying at home from work or paying for outside childcare. This birth-strike may help us to grapple with what is happening in Texas right now and what may soon be happening across the country; an economy that has obscured the cost and therefore denied the wages of domestic work, of social reproduction, doesn’t appreciate that young people especially young women are making the cost clearer by increasingly choosing not to start families at all. In the midst of a pandemic, in the midst of a labor shortage, we perhaps should not be surprised to see a fresh attack on a woman’s right to make that choice.

And with this attack, and in light of our scripture readings this morning, we need to grapple with something else: this attack on reproductive rights will play out very differently depending on where a woman or a young couple are financially, whether they are rich or if they are poor. Historically, both in this country and in others, wealthier people have been able to protect their reproductive rights even when such laws are passed by the state, while poorer people, especially poorer women, do not have that same luxury. In such a society, laws like these bring our

reading from Proverbs into the present moment. Laws like these will mean that our economy will, with renewed cruelty, rob poor women precisely *because* they are poor.

When I first worked at UPS we were told to wear work boots for our safety. And that's probably right, it's a good idea, it can be dangerous work. It's not actually in our contract that we need to, but when you're first hired and you haven't "made book" (you're not yet protected by the union), the company can be pretty persuasive. The thing is though, they don't provide the boots that they insist on. You have to go out and buy boots yourself. They don't tell you that when you ride the bus for two hours in a city like Jacksonville to come in to interview for a position that pays 12 bucks an hour. So they offer you the job, they let you know you'll need to provide your own boots, insist that you do; and they say, not to worry, you can get a pair at Wal-mart for \$20. So now the new employee will ride the bus to the Wal-Mart too, and spend \$20 they don't really have, before they've ever set foot in the warehouse let alone taken home a paycheck. And then of course those \$20 work boots don't last. Every six weeks they get a new hole in the sole, and suddenly your safety boots aren't so safe. So you have to go and buy another pair.

I happened to have bought some unnecessarily expensive boots in college, good ones. I can't remember if I bought them with my parent's money or with my student loan money. Anyway, there I was, not really needing this job at UPS, making more than my co-workers who badly needed the job, simply because I came into that workplace with a head start, with a good pair of boots. Unlike my co-workers, I didn't have to deduct 20 bucks every third or fourth paycheck to go and buy a new pair.

I was thinking of this kind of robbery mentioned in Proverbs the other day when I saw my financing come back for the car Caity and I finally bought. As an immigrant to this country, I have no credit built up--the bank described me to the dealership as "a ghost" when considering my credit application. I'm a minister working in the community, but that doesn't matter to a big bank that is not in the community. Fortunately Caity could buy the car jointly with me. But a young woman on her own who suddenly needs a car to keep up with her job across the city at UPS and has to get to a Wal-mart for her bi-monthly new boots, who because she is poor has not built up good credit, she may have to turn to a predatory dealership that can't wait to lock her into a loan at 15 or 20%. This is when scripture stops seeming ancient and far off. This is when I start to really hear it say to us, "do not rob the poor because they are poor."

When she ends up having to quit her job because this country has stolen her reproductive rights and now it costs more to have outside childcare than it does for her to quit her job and stay at home, this is when I really hear our scripture, "do not rob the poor because they are poor." And since welfare reform passed in the 1990s under President Clinton, and this woman *must* go back to work if she expects to keep receiving the measly government support that is barely keeping a roof over her head and allowing her to care for her child, this is when I really hear our scripture, "do not rob the poor because they are poor."

Without these stories, we might be confused by such a phrase in scripture. If someone is already poor, what can you take from them? How can you rob someone who has nothing? But bringing our scripture into the present--into real life circumstances--we can begin to see that our scripture is telling us *not to exploit people*. "Do not rob the poor because they are poor" means do not exploit them, do not take advantage, do not prey on the vulnerable, like the big banks did to set us all up for the crash in '08. Or like when a multinational corporation robs from its poorest employees by making them buy--and buy again and again--the cheap boots that another multinational corporation is able to sell at such a low price in the first place because they're doing the same thing to their employees.

Without looking to see what life has become for far too many people, we might mistakenly come to think that our scriptures--our faith and our religion--is only about self improvement or about inner peace or a soothing spirituality. We might think our faith is only about comfort or relief. Without being involved in each other's lives in a supportive and nonjudgmental way, without going out into our communities, without widening our circle across Western Mass, we might think our faith has nothing to do with our labor and our workplaces. Some people might even come to think that God and religion and certainly our scriptures are dead, like James would fear.

But I think the opposite is increasingly true. Our society has lost its way. And in solidarity with every working person here and abroad--from the working women of Texas to the working women of Afghanistan--we have an urgent task, to hear our scriptures and even to share them as if for the first time, with unbridled joy, because to every one of us shocked and overwhelmed by unfolding events in the world today, the Hebrew Bible and the Christian--and the sacred texts of all people of faith and goodwill--they still proclaim this good news found in James this morning, found like a light beam pulsing through even this present darkness: *God has chosen the poor* even if this world does not, and God has chosen those who stand with them, those who have dared to bring their faith to life. And *we*, not those who rob from the poor because they are poor--*we* are the heirs to the kingdom of God on earth, just as it is in heaven.

Because earth is where we are, it's where we live and work. The hilltowns are where we are, where we live and work. And so our faith must live and work here too.

Alleluia and amen.