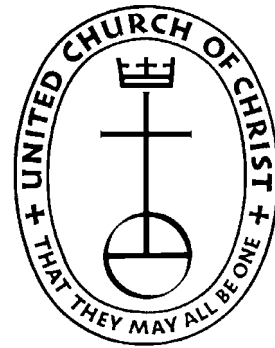


A New Moral Underground – ? or !

A Sermon By —
JERALD M. STINSON
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In a time of economic distress, the church and its members are called to work for a fair economic system that provides jobs for all those who seek them and to ease the suffering of people struggling to survive. Is it right also to cheat a large corporation in order to help someone in need get by?

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,
Passionately Committed to Social Justice*
241 Cedar Avenue, Long Beach, California

Rev. Jerald Stinson
September 5, 2010 (#1412)
Reading: Leviticus 19:13; Deuteronomy 24:14-15

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A New Moral Underground – ? or !

Labor Day is a holiday primarily marking the end of summer. Little attention is paid to its original purpose: to honor workers and commemorate their contributions and struggles to bring justice and dignity to the workplace.

I think that original intent provides an opportunity for faith communities to consider how our religious values and convictions might help us address labor issues today.

We live in difficult times. Almost 15 million American workers are unemployed, nearly a quarter of whom have been seeking work for more than a year. Nearly one out of every five Americans who want to work cannot find a job or can find only part-time work.

In the last 20 years, there has been a tremendous surge in the wealth of America's richest citizens, but today one in four American workers earns less than \$9 an hour, and therefore 39% of the nation's children now live in low-income households.

Clearly we need more jobs – jobs that lift people out of poverty rather than trapping them in it.

Now for many of you this is about more than statistics. Some of you are currently unemployed or you have been out of work recently. Some of you have new jobs, but they may not be at all what you want; you do the work just to survive. Some of you have good jobs, but you live in fear that you could become unemployed at any time. Some of you are adjusting to furlough days, or cuts in the hours you work or in your salary. Or if it is not you in those situations, it is someone you know and love.

Last year this church eliminated several jobs and cut others to part-time. Times are tough.

A statement by the UCC Justice and Witness Ministries said: "The economic storm battering the U.S. and nations around the world is bringing job losses, falling incomes, home foreclosures, delayed retirements, and declines in overall well being. The economic situation is harsh and uncertain. The church, called to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God [those words from Micah that we sang earlier in

our service mean the church] must be especially faithful and vigilant during such a time as this.”

I think there are two things the church is called to do – the first involves justice advocacy and the second involves compassionate outreach.

So first, the church and its members must work for a fair economic system that provides jobs for all those who seek them – jobs that offer living wages with access to decent medical care. And if to do that means to increase taxes on those who are affluent, that is clearly our moral obligation.

Let me share two passages from the Torah.

First, from Leviticus: “Do not oppress your neighbors or rob them. Do not hold back a worker’s wages until the next day.”

And then from Deuteronomy: “Never hold back the wages of a poor worker in need, whether an Israelite or a foreigner. Pay the wages before sunset for the worker is need of that payment.”

Rabbi Jill Jacobs said: “These verses are significant in acknowledging the essential power and wealth imbalance between employer and employee. The texts understand the employee’s dependence on the wages. From these verses,” Rabbi Jacobs says, “we understand workers to be a protected category, similar to widows, orphans and sojourners.”

So standing alongside workers, lobbying for decent jobs for everyone, is not just a political act, it a religious practice. Our theology, at its core, says every human being is loved, affirmed and accepted by God. If that’s true, the opportunity to work at a meaningful job at a living wage becomes a basic human right. That’s what we declare on Labor Day!

Our denomination has a long tradition of lobbying for justice in the workplace. In the early years of the 20th century, two charismatic Congregationalists – Jane Addams and Washington Gladden – were prominent voices in the labor movement.

In 1973, a delegation of 95 UCC leaders left our General Synod in St. Louis to fly to the Coachella Valley to stand in solidarity with farm workers in their struggle for justice.

In 1989, the UCC’s 17th General Synod issued a Pronouncement on Christian Faith, Economic Life and Justice that spoke of the importance of looking at the process

by which economic decisions are made through the perspective of our faith.

In 1997, the UCC's 21st General Synod affirmed the right of workers to organize for collective bargaining regarding wages, benefits and working conditions.

Recently, the UCC supported the struggle for justice by workers at Taco Bell, McDonalds, Burger King, and the Smithfield Packing Company. Our own Tom Miller played a vital role in turning around the employment policies of Taco Bell.

In 2007, the UCC moved its General Synod from one location in Hartford, Connecticut to another in order to support local workers. And the UCC has already announced that at the General Synod here in Long Beach in 2013, if the Long Beach Hilton continues to refuse to negotiate with its workers, and if there is still a labor boycott of the Hilton, the UCC will break its contract and not house Synod delegates in that hotel.

We have a long history of labor advocacy. My own involvement with CLUE (Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice) reflects that advocacy on a local level seeking justice for the drivers at the two local ports and for workers in the Long Beach hotels. Several members of this congregation joined me at a recent protest at the Hyatt. Our church has become the meeting place for a new organization aimed at bringing together members of the LGBT community and labor leaders.

So at all levels, the church must be a voice for full employment in which all workers labor in safe environments, just and fair settings free of racism, chauvinism, ageism, Islamophobia and homophobia; and that all workers receive living wages.

Now the second mission of the church is to ease the suffering of people struggling to survive. The church as an institution and each of us as individual members, must reach out with compassion toward those in need around us.

This congregation is already doing some of that. Part of the Outreach Board's budget goes to local groups helping people in need. Once a month, Deb Moore and her crew of volunteers prepare the evening meal for a homeless shelter. My discretionary fund, supported by the generosity of many of you, assists those who knock on our door seeking help. We have a special fund to help our own members in need.

The incredible Summer Day Camp – all day every day for six weeks each summer – provides enrichment opportunities for poor children, trying to keep them from falling behind affluent children in the quest for success in this society. Its new spinoff program, a three nights a week help with homework effort for downtown teens, begins this fall.

Our Drop-In Center feeds and offers needed services to hundreds of homeless, unemployed and working poor people each Sunday.

Those are all programs of compassionate service.

But now I want to talk about what sociologist Lisa Dodson calls a “New Moral Underground” – folks who offer compassionate service in a kind of Robin Hood style.

We live in a morally complicated world. In this congregation, we acknowledge the ambiguity of moral decision-making. We don’t hand folks a catechism for either theology or morality – there is no list of questions with the right answers. One of the things I love about the UCC is that we are not afraid to ask difficult questions, even if the answers sometimes are “I don’t know.” We are not afraid to leave the security of seeing everything as black and white, and instead to move into more challenging shades of grey.

So are there situations where stealing from a large corporation to help a poor employee is a morally right thing to do? Are there situations when lying or fudging on time cards is the best way to follow the example of Jesus? The situations I am going to share with you show how difficult those issues are.

Lisa Dodson’s intriguing new book, *The Moral Underground*, focuses on what happens to people whose deeply held beliefs about justice and fairness come into conflict with obedience to various rules and laws.

For instance, Alba works for very low wages at a large retail store in New England. She has two small children. She says, “They keep talking about terror attacks. Well, I have them every night when I’m getting home late and wonder how my children are.” Alba can’t afford a babysitter, and since she works the late shift, her children are alone for several hours most days after school. She says, “Sometimes I just cut out early when no one’s looking” or she has a girlfriend cover for her. She doesn’t like breaking the rules, cheating, and is terrified of getting caught, but her children come first.

Alice is a senior manager in a large nursing home. She told Professor Dodson about nurse’s aides who provide the hands-on care and yet get paid hardly anything. As Alice and Dr. Dodson watched an aide lovingly help a shaky man get to his chair, Alice said the aides provide such loving care to the home’s residents but can’t afford to take care of their own families. So Alice deliberately sidesteps regulations and fudges on paperwork about how many hours people have worked to help some of those aides. Is that morally wrong or is she part of a new moral underground finding ways to truly express compassion?

Andrew manages a large food company business in the Midwest. He supervises employees, many of whom make poverty wages. He has been deeply affected by the stories those employees tell him about their struggles to survive. So, he said, "I pad their paychecks because you can't live on what they make. I punch them out after they have left for a doctor's appointment. I give them food to take home. I put them in for more hours than they actually work." Moral or not?

Joaquin, a food company manager in the West confessed, "I basically feed the workers most of the time. I let them make meals for after their shifts. Some of the women are single moms and when their kids come in after school, I feed them. I don't think they can feed their families on what they make here." For Joaquin, watching parents work so hard and go home without enough money to feed their kids justifies breaking the rules.

Judy, a health care business manager in the East, said, "I have to say that most of these parents are doing everything to be there for their children and at the same time do this job. Honestly, I don't see how they do it. I couldn't." She said, "Sometimes I look the other way when there is an issue about something. You just look the other way." Compassion or cheating?

Two more stories.

Bea, a 40-year-old floor manager at a low-end box store in Maine said most of the employees she supervises are women with at most high school diplomas. She spoke specifically about Nancy – two kids and a husband on disability. Nancy's high school daughter Edy worked all through high school to supplement the family income. But when her prom approached, there was no money for a dress. Bea said, "How is it fair that this family can't buy a prom dress?" She said, "I remember how much my prom meant to me. I don't know about where you live, but around here it's a big deal. You want to look glamorous – not just good, but runway good. No way was Edy going to have the dress, the hair, the manicure."

Bea said, "I couldn't help but feeling that I was to blame. Nancy doesn't make what she deserves." Well, they sell prom dresses at Bea's store. She said, "Let's just say we made some mistakes with our prom dress orders last year. Too many were ordered, some went back. It got confusing." Dodson asked her "So Edy looked good at her prom?" And Bea said, "She knocked them dead." Bea is part of a huge corporation. Was getting Edy a free dress morally right or wrong?

And finally, Mary Jane, a retail sales manager in Denver, told the story of a single mother, Jenna, who called in sick when she had no sick days left. Mary Jane was con-

vinced Jenna wasn't really sick, so she called Jenna back and got the truth.

On her way to work, Jenna dropped her baby off at day care without diapers because Jenna just didn't have money to buy them. The head of the day care center said she couldn't take the baby – this was the third time Jenna had done this and that meant the day care staff had to use other people's diapers for Jenna's child. Jenna begged them to take the baby, explaining that when she got her paycheck she would buy a bag for everyone else.

Mary Jane said, "I know what Pampers cost and I know what Jenna makes and as it is she's got to be cutting back on everything else just to buy them." So Mary Jane bought some Pampers and took them to the Day Care Center.

Mary Jane said the incident stayed in her mind. She imagined what it felt like for Jenna to be holding her child, begging the child care worker to take the baby, without having diapers or clothing or anything a proper mother has when dropping off her child. Could the child sense what was going on? Then Jenna had to leave, feeling humiliated, and call in to work telling a lie because telling the truth was too embarrassing.

At that moment something shifted for Mary Jane. With her own money, she began to buy items that helped the mothers who worked for her – that seems noble, using her own money. But that seemed so small. So she diverted some of the resources from the store, goods that could be overstocked. She said she found ways to share the company's wealth because the wages the company paid did not.

Lisa Dodson says there is an economic fault line today. On one side are ordinary people working hard, sustained by their pay, and on the other side ordinary people working hard but unable to scrape by. She says that fault line becomes a moral line. The managers in those stories reached a point where they concluded they had to do more than just sympathize with the working poor; they had to act.

Andrew, who padded pay checks and added hours to time sheets, said that when you see people being treated unfairly and you realize you play a role in that unfairness, the right thing to do is to act against it. Are those managers hurting anyone other than large wealthy corporations? Is that wrong?

When we talked about ethics in our confirmation class, that profound middle-school theologian Ben Bond pointed out that once you are dishonest, for whatever motivation, you begin a process that almost always ends up in hurt and pain.

That's why my sermon title ends with a question mark and an exclamation point. Go home today and think about this yourself. Is this a moral underground or an im-

moral underground built on cheating and deception? Or something in between?

But know that at some point we must act. Clearly we must become advocates of a fair economic system that provides jobs for all – jobs that provide living wages, not like the wages paid by the Long Beach Hilton or the Hyatt, but living wages with decent medical care. If we could reach that goal, those managers wouldn't face the moral dilemmas.

And know also that institutionally and individually we must find ways to help those who are suffering in poverty today.

Labor Day can be about so much more than summer's end.