

The Biblical Vision and Karl Marx: A 150th Retrospective

Scripture: Leviticus 25:1-17; Acts 2:43-47; Matthew 25:31-40

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Labor Day does not appear on the liturgical calendar, and there are some purists, some high liturgical churches where civil holidays are not noted, and I suppose if I had to choose if there was a conflict between a liturgical festival day and a civil holiday, obviously, I would take the text for the day in the church, but civil holidays also point to some significant human concerns which are not without deep biblical concern, as well. And so, on occasion it is, I think, appropriate to have a sermon on the theme of Memorial Day or the Declaration of Independence or, in this case, the Labor Day weekend. As I said, there are purists who wouldn't do that, not even that highest, holiest of all festival days, Mother's Day, but then, not to observe that is to take one's life in one's hands. But, today I want to address the theme of Labor Day, a day set aside to honor labor, a day in which it might be appropriate for us to think about the whole economic aspect of life and its impact upon our spiritual existence.

The year 1998 is the 150th anniversary of the publication of the *Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx, assisted by Friedrich Engels, and I promise you more than I can deliver in the title of the sermon when I say, "150th Anniversary Retrospective." I don't really know very much about Karl Marx. I don't really know very much about economic history, but I do think that it is appropriate to take a moment this morning in our worship to reflect on our spiritual lives in relationship to that which is so dominant in our society and in our lives, as well - the power of the economic dimension.

When I was reading the recent issue of *Tikkun*, the magazine edited by Rabbi Michael Lerner, I found the piece on spirituality which is in your literature, and what I want to try to communicate to you this morning is the place of our economic endeavor in the totality of our lives. As Lerner writes, "We live at the end of a century in which the competitive economic market has demonstrated its powerful ability to shape a dominant consciousness of the planet." Economic concerns being a dominant determinative of our minds and our hearts, shaping our lives and our motivations, it's rather interesting that this message should have been planned for this Lord's Day which is at the end of one of those great

volatile weeks on Wall Street. The ups and the downs, and the downs had it, and I suppose that there are those of you sitting here, along with me, who at least in the paper count are considerably less wealthy today than we were last Sunday. But it has our attention, doesn't it? There was an article on the front page of one of the newspapers this morning in which a commentator was saying that we hear voices assuring us that all is well, the economy is essentially solid, the stock market is still a safe place to be, hang in there, ride it out. And then rather disconcertingly, he quoted similar statements from October of 1929 prior to the Great Fall.

Well, if it all happens, will you jump out of a skyscraper window? My question to you this morning really is, "Where will you be if you get where you're going?" How will you be if you achieve your dreams? What if you accomplish that which you are killing yourself to accomplish - how will it be with you? Will there be contentment, peace, serenity? Will you be a fulfilled and whole human being if you should be granted your fondest dreams, the things that you are giving your life to? I think that's a legitimate question for a Labor Day weekend, and I believe that Karl Marx, 150 years ago, had a prophetic insight and amazing insight into the power of capital to determine the shape of global existence.

In an anniversary edition of the *Communist Manifesto* that has an introduction by an English scholar, Eric Hobsbawm, the dust cover has an interesting paragraph. It says that Hobsbawm writes that the world described by Marx and Engels in 1848, in passages of dark, laconic eloquence, is recognizably the world in which we live 150 years later. The author identifies the insights which underpin the *Manifesto's* startling contemporary relevance, the recognition of capitalism as a world system capable of marshaling production on a global scale, its devastating impact on all aspects of human existence - work, the family, and the distribution of wealth, and the understanding that, far from being a stable, immutable system, it is, on the contrary, susceptible to enormous convulsions and crises and contains the seeds of its own destruction.

Historical development did not prove Marx correct. That is, what he thought would happen with the rise of capitalism did not happen according to his script. But, he saw with an amazing vision and insight the tremendous impact of the economic dimension of our human existence individually and in terms of human community. And what he saw, the dangers he saw, and the problems that he saw have been experienced and we are not out of the woods in terms of the consequences yet.

Someone who was here on the 4th of July weekend and heard my sermon, "A Declaration of Interdependence," in which I suggested that the Holy Spirit was creating this global community, knocking down barriers and boundaries, all of which are artificial, creating therefore a world community, wrote me a very perceptive letter in which he said, "Dreamers dream and all of that is fine, but in the meantime, how about the people who get hurt? In building a global community, what about the disruption to local communities? And having that

universal dream, what about the particularity of human communities, their identity, their character, their nature, their uniqueness?" He wrote a very, very good letter, and then he shared with me just what I needed, another book.

It was written by Kirkpatrick Sale, whose book *Rebels Against the Future* tells the story of the Luddites. Do you know who they were? In the onset of the Industrial Revolution in England, the Luddites were small craftsmen, cottage industry people, textile people. And, of course, with the discovery of steam and power and the building of factories, these individual craftsmen were being put out of work. They were able to work traditionally at their own pace and in their own environment according to the rhythms of their own life and nature, and now, there stood a factory! And that factory was taking their jobs and also hiring them - they became the laborers who no longer could set their agenda according to their own rhythm, the rhythm of their life and that which led to human well-being, but the cadences of the piston and steel determined the nature of their work and their labor. So, what did they do? They took their guns and pistols and pickaxes and they attacked the factories. In 1811, 1812 there were a number of textile plants that were destroyed, and it was a violent revolt against what was the inevitable movement, it seems, of historical development.

Well, Karl Marx saw what they were doing, but he recognized that there was this personal self-interest involved in their attacking the factory, because they were losing their jobs. But Marx saw a bigger picture: he saw the power of capital, as Lerner says, to determine the production globally. He saw the power of capital to continue to pile up wealth and the tremendous determinant that it would be of human destiny and human society. Marx didn't fight the rise of capitalism. He figured it would have the seeds of its own death within it and eventually, having produced a large laboring class, the laboring class would revolt, overthrow the owners, and there would be this classless society. Now, it didn't work that way; it hasn't worked that way. His vision was Utopian, in that sense, the classless society where the development of each was the condition of the development of all, where everyone worked according to his or her ability and received according to his or her need. A kind of Utopian vision. *Utopia* is an interesting word from the Greek language. *Utopia* means "no place." There is no place like this. No place. Maybe we would say no possibility.

But, where did Karl Marx get his vision? Where did he get such a fantastic idea? Well, he was from a Jewish family that converted for convenience reasons to Christianity, but he was nurtured in the Old Testament prophets. His uncle was a rabbi. It's a Messianic vision. It's a vision shaped by the Hebrew prophets, and the Hebrew prophets were those who spoke in the name of the God Who was concerned for human well-being, for human community, Who was concerned for the spiritual well-being of people, knowing the temptation of people to get caught up in de-humanizing activity and the de-humanizing chase in which they would lose their own soul.

Scholars don't think that probably Israel ever fully lived out that Levitical year of Jubilee, Sabbath Year and then the year of Jubilee, but it was a part of the Hebrew tradition and there are enough references in the Hebrew scriptures to know that it was operative, to what extent, we're not sure. But, isn't that an interesting idea? Here in the Bible we have this suggestion that every seventh year the land should lie fallow. Now, it's an agricultural society and you have to make the translation, but how about a sabbatical every seven years? Do you want not only to not harvest the field, but also shut the doors of the factory, let the machines cool off and the laborers take a year off? You intelligent, academic people still keep that custom alive and I've practiced it a time or two, also. It's kind of nice, under the guise of doing heavy work, heavy thinking.

Now, listen to me. Listen to me. What was operative in the Sabbath principle? No matter how the practical execution of it, what was operative? Sabbath principle was the principle by which, according to the understanding of the Hebrew, God was saying, "For your sake, for my sake, cease and desist. Unplug. Every seventh day, stop." The Sabbath day could be kept with legalistic rigidity.

I grew up in a setting, a home, an environment of Calvinistic grace that was all law. I, as a child, experienced ugly Sundays. Couldn't do anything, and it wasn't very much fun for a kid growing up. I think there are others like me, so that the Sabbath principle gets bad press because it was legalistically applied and sort of seemed to be a way to drain all the pleasure out of a day.

Donald Gray Barnhouse, a great preacher of an earlier generation out of a Scottish Presbyterian home which was the only thing worse than a Dutch Calvinist home, said that when he was a kid in church and they sang "Day of All the Week the Best, emblem of eternal rest," he thought, "Good grief, if heaven is like Sunday, I don't want to go there." But, the principle is absolutely beautiful, totally humane, and divine. It cuts the nerve of that compulsiveness that gets hold of us to produce and to consume and to acquire and to aggrandize. It says, "Stop! Just stop." I don't want to emphasize it too much because Nancy may get the idea and say, "Physician, heal thyself." Because you don't have to be a laborer in a factory to be a workaholic. That was the principle, and the year of Jubilee, of course, where it all goes back the way it was sets limits on the degree to which there can be this present widening gap between wealth and poverty. And the recognition that all of us, the shrewdest business man, the most skilled worker, the most industrious person, is finally a steward of God Who alone owns the resources.

So, when you laugh at Karl Marx, you might as well also take your scissors and cut Leviticus 25 out of your Bible. And you're going to have a problem, too, with the immediate aftermath of Pentecost when people were living their lives under the impact of the Spirit of God when they lived in a commune kind of situation, from which, of course, we get the word communist. Now, thank God for Acts 5, the story of Ananias and Sapphira. They were going to do like Barnabas, sell their

farm and bring all the proceeds to the deacons, but they were also practical and they kept a little back. They told the deacons, who asked, "Did you sell that farm for \$10,000?" "Yes, we did." Well, they had sold it for \$12,500. And Bingo, there were two dead Christians, right on the spot.

Well, we know communal living for the good of all didn't work, so we can be done with it. We don't have to worry about it anymore. It may be in the Bible, but the Bible gives us clear indication that it doesn't work. But, of course, I suppose that community of early Jesus people got some of their impression from Jesus who said, in the one description of the judgment scene in the whole Bible, that the difference between the sheep and the goats has nothing to do with grace or justification by faith or any of that stuff, it has to do with practical things like feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the ones in prison, the unconscious goodness and care of compassion.

So, on this Labor Day Sunday there's enough in the scripture to warn us about the possibility of getting all caught up in chasing dreams and building kingdoms, of getting our priorities all mixed up, thinking that it is of primary importance to secure ourselves into perpetuity, to recognize the possibility that we can be so caught up in the schemes in which we are engaged, that we lose our soul and we have no peace. My Labor Day message to you is that Karl Marx got a lot of things wrong, but he did see the threat to our soul of the economic dimension of our lives, and he got a lot of it from the Bible. So, for God's sake, for your sake, take a moment and ask *yourself where you'll be when you get where you're going* and, if you do really get where you're going, is it really where you want to be?