

An Injury to All
UU Church of Vancouver
August 13, 2023

Reflection on the Theme by Brett Raunig

For today's service Eric asked the question, "How do we respond when the religion of capitalism clashes with our core principles.

This got me thinking and I'll apologize now for my next sentence. But again my reflection today takes me to the relationship I have with my daily commute and my bicycle. However this story isn't really about the commute, the people, or beautiful wildlife that I see. This is more about how I have gotten caught up in the American way of needing or thinking I need something that I don't have.

I've been riding my bike to and from work on and off for the past 15 years. I have an e-bike, a mountain bike, and a road bike. My commute is approx. 10 miles one-way. When I purchased the e-bike in 2019 I mostly rode it back and forth to work. However, this last winter I refurbished and tuned up my old steel framed road bike and started riding this to work in an attempt to get more exercise.

I know you might be wondering, how is any of this a bad thing? And what does it have to do with capitalism? Well, when I refurbished this bike I put some new components on it, new wheels, and got some new tires. The new tires were tubeless – the newest greatest fastest type tire that everyone in cycling is now using.

There are a few of us that commute to work and we often talk about our commutes and our bikes. Everyone seems to have a few bikes: a winter commuter, and a faster summer bike, and one of my coworkers has a titanium bike that is super lightweight.

During the process of refurbishing my road bike I meticulously researched parts on-line and slowly added new stuff to make it shift better, look shinier, and attempt to reduce the weight. However through this journey I found I slowly started to become obsessed with trying to figure out a way to make it lighter and better than it was. I had truly gotten caught up in the next best thing and my google search account was feeding me better tires, better shifting components, electronic shifting, and I was starting to think about the weight of each component. How I could shave a few more grams by upgrading the components I had just put on.

If that wasn't enough I was also getting fed information and ads for new bikes and several made out of titanium like my coworkers.

I remember thinking to myself. Ok, how do I convince Wendy that I need a new bike?

What is it that motivates us to want more? Through this journey I started to ask myself What is it that drives me and our what seems to be our culture to want more material things. How do we pause or refocus those thoughts? How do I examine this deeper. What is it that truly feeds my soul?

An Injury to All by Eric LaBrant

While holidays like Independence Day, Memorial Day, and Veteran's Day commemorate military struggles and those who've sacrificed, Labor Day honors the struggle of American workers to unionize. Originally, the holiday was established to commemorate the growing power of organized labor in the late 1800's, including the successful push for an 8-hour work day.

Given the opportunity to preach about Labor Day last year, I discussed the history of anti-union violence in America, which has had the bloodiest labor history of any industrialized nation, ever. But there wasn't time, in a single message, to give it the six-why's treatment. Why are companies willing to profit from harming workers? Why do businesses so frequently damage our environment? Why are folks willing to defend these immoral behaviors? Why does so much of our culture seem so dehumanizing? Why does our society tolerate this? And why is this such a big problem for those who subscribe to Unitarian Universalist principles?

Let's explore, if not an answer, at least some context for thinking and talking about our relationship to work in our society, and how we can celebrate the humanity of workers. The ongoing struggle to promote the dignity and worth of workers directly aligns with UU principles, and touches every part of American culture and daily life.

It's impossible to fully understand this struggle, or its powerful influence on our culture, without examining another religion, one that attempts to masquerade as economic theory or stay hidden altogether: Capitalism.

Unlike many other -isms that are quickly recognizable as religious in nature, Capitalism is typically presented as an economic system, or a framework for economic policy. But there are several traits that make it deeply religious in nature, including a set of unchallenged doctrines, a collection of myths and legends, and a tight integration into our culture. I'm not advocating for a particular policy or financial system, but rather calling attention to unquestioned beliefs.

Some religions emphasize faith as a way to deal with teachings that contradict science, or even one another. More often, those teachings are simply never challenged, or rely on explanations that boil down to "that's just how it is," and Capitalism relies heavily on these tools. Consider the belief that a corporation is intended to outlast its shareholders and live forever, a doctrine taught in business and law classes as Perpetual Existence. Simultaneously contradicting that doctrine is elevating never-ending business growth as a virtue. Taxes are universally considered bad for business. A true believer might accuse me of oversimplifying, but that's to be expected when challenging dogma. Natural resources are treated as infinite. Workers are interchangeable parts, not only with other workers but with machines as well. From an early age, we're taught that the highest and best goal for any person is to be a productive member of society, never asking -- is productivity really our purpose?

The foundation that puts the Capital in capitalism, is belief that investment is a form of production. Investment is never discussed as a reward for having money in the first place.

There are myths and legends to support these beliefs, frequently told as literal truth. You may have heard the legend of the self-made billionaire, who builds a massive fortune single-handedly without generational wealth, workers, or public infrastructure. There's the myth of trickle-down economics, plausible only by rebranding the wealthy as "job creators." Job creators are a recurring hero in Capitalist mythology, built on the Capitalist doctrine that getting a job cures everything. Most companies resist hiring folks with a criminal record, even as gainful employment promises to prevent ex-convicts from committing new crimes. Getting a job is pitched as a cure-all for homelessness. Getting a job is even touted as the solution for a bad paying job -- just get a second or even third job! Burning the candle at both ends is the legendary path to prosperity under Capitalism.

Perhaps its most frequent myth is one adapted from several other religions -- without Capitalism we wouldn't have something good. Without Ra, the sun wouldn't rise. Without the fertility gods, the crops wouldn't grow. Without capitalism, we wouldn't have trade or commerce. But the sun, agriculture, and trade predate the worship of money, or even money itself.

Capitalism isn't "The market," currency, or the ability to transact business. Folks do business under Communism and other non-capitalist countries, and money isn't actually capital. Capitalism also isn't a natural result of American ideals of freedom. Capitalism created slavery and colonialism, with American ideas about freedom often in direct opposition.

Much as Christianity has shaped American culture, the worship of money has as well. Slavery, colonization, and genocide continue to have resounding impacts on our culture, from how we discuss race to our very concept of private property. Slavery wears a different costume but continues today with for-profit prisons and legal requirements to maintain employment after inmates are released. The doctrine of perpetual existence contaminates our personal relationships, as we weigh relationship success or failure on their ability to last forever, pressing people to make all-or-nothing decisions about beginning or ending relationships. The doctrine of perpetual improvement quietly influences how we approach work, play, and even how we bike to work, in hopes of squeezing one more dollar from us.

The destruction of entire ecosystems are up for debate, while natural resources are treated as infinite. Climate change denial is built on the myth that human impact is finite while the earth's atmosphere is essentially infinite. In that belief system, human impact simply cannot be great enough to cause problems.

Greed shapes how we think about healthcare in our culture as well. Health insurance seems almost like a responsibility today, rather than as a financial instrument. Two thirds of American bankruptcies are

due to medical debt. People die rationing insulin, a life-saving medicine originally placed into the public domain by its discoverer.

We need only look downtown to witness our system of private property forcing folks to die of exposure to the elements for the capital crime of poverty. This too is considered a political debate, rather than a completely avoidable moral and human tragedy. I believe we will look back with shame on this chapter of history, in which we sent millions to their deaths to protect wealth and property.

The religion of wealth influences our society by framing discussions we have with each other and ourselves in terms of finance first. It assumes that the benefits of innovation should go to investors, rather than workers or even the innovators themselves. If someone invents a machine that digs ten times as quickly as a shovel, it could enable workers to devote more time to art or family while maintaining the same output. Or, it could enrich workers by allowing them to accomplish more in fewer hours! Instead, we discuss worker displacement, with an unstated assumption that innovation will slash the cost of digging, and most workers with shovels will lose their livelihoods. In everything from fast food kiosks to Artificial Intelligence, innovation is never discussed as something that empowers human workers.

Minimum wage is debated in terms of what a job is worth, not what a worker is worth. We focus on the simple nature of sweeping floors or flipping burgers, and not on the human beings companies need to accomplish those tasks.

Policy discussions prioritize a business case over a moral imperative. Companies weigh forcing remote workers to return to the office based on economics, seldom considering the human impact unless it increases the cost of recruiting and training new workers.

We debate health, safety, and the environment as trade-offs with profits -- money spent protecting workers or the environment is seen as taking away from the bottom line, leading to unsafe working conditions and environmental damage.

We question the demands of workers for living wages and safe working conditions during union negotiations, but seldom profit demands of executives and shareholders. We commonly debate whether a fast food worker should earn a salary of \$75,000 per year, but never in the context of the CEO making \$75m, or shareholders reaping profits of \$75b. Reckless and obsessive pursuit of anything other than money would be considered an addiction, but those who sacrifice all else for wealth are cheered on for their success. Capitalism is framing the discussion before it has even begun.

There are irreconcilable differences between UU principles and a culture built on the worship of wealth.

Our fifth principle upholds the right of conscience and the democratic process within our society, in the face of a belief system that considers corporations as people, and money as speech. We vote once or twice a year at a ballot box while corporations send billions of dollars directly to our legislatures. We have no vote at all for our Supreme Court, openly bribed with lavish gifts. Our faith demands that we reject this!

Our goals of a world of peace and respect for the interdependent web of all existence are directly at odds with a belief system that has lit our forests on fire and making entire regions uninhabitable while still advocating for oil and gas profits. Thousands of species, completely irreplaceable, have been wiped from the face of the earth, with thousands more on the brink. Irreplaceable. If we are serious about protecting that interdependent web, we are obligated to speak up, loudly, forcefully, and often, for those who have no voice.

The religion of Capitalism dehumanizes us, a head-on collision with the inherent worth and dignity of every person, promoting direct attacks on justice, equity, and compassion. Many of us have seen GoFundMe campaigns for folks who've been diagnosed with cancer. Corporations discard thousands of tons of food each day while children starve next door. We live under a justice system where no one expects a wealthy defendant to face actual consequences. It's taken for granted that some folks are devalued -- artists, the uneducated, the addicted, and workers who do not turn a profit, from teachers to janitors. If we are serious about human worth and dignity, we should be sounding the alarm, loudly, about this avoidable and ongoing catastrophe.

These unexamined beliefs provide the context for the fundamental and ongoing struggle in which American workers fight for their rights, are fiercely and violently attacked, and in which we are compelled to support them in our daily lives.

Strikes and disruptions by actors and writers in Hollywood, UPS workers, and longshore workers, remind us that without human workers, there would be no commerce, no corporation, no stock dividend. While Starbucks and Amazon workers have unionized in many locations, management still refuses to ratify contracts. Walmart continues to invest heavily to prevent unionization, including required anti-union training for all new hires.

What is our part then, in this fierce and sometimes violent battle against the rights of workers? How can we use our words and actions to celebrate the humanity of workers, in keeping with our UU principles? Bear in mind, I'm not discussing economic or political policy today -- only how we might act on our values in the wider world.

The first two calls to action are simple and clear. First, never ever cross a picket line. Crossing a picket line actively, financially contributes to a corporation invested in fighting against its workers. Second, avoid spending money at anti-union companies. Before each purchase we should be weighing the

convenience of drive-thru coffee or ordering something online against our value for the health and safety of the person delivering it, or their ability to afford basic needs like shelter and healthcare.

The third call to action is more complex: we must reframe the discussion every chance we get, starting with our own thinking. Should innovation improve the lives of workers and humanity in general, or further enrich the wealthy? Can society prosper **without** forcing folks to sleep on sidewalks? Let us insist on the **inherent** dignity and worth of workers in our conversations, regardless of their job or title. Let us constantly remind ourselves and others that a business relying on starvation wages or human suffering to turn a profit is NOT a viable business model. Relying on starvation wages or human suffering to turn a profit is NOT a viable business model. Poke holes in myths and legends that ignore the work of laborers or the price of publicly-funded infrastructure. Celebrate the worker who sweeps the floor and takes out the trash as more vital to society than an investor who signs checks. Honestly, which one can society go without longer? Celebrate the scarcity and preciousness of life, and the time laborers spend at work.

Celebrate the humanity of the worker!