Rev. Betsy Mead Tabor
UU Fellowship of the Eastern Slopes
September 1, 2019 – Labor Day Sunday

Broadening what we honor on Labor Day.

Opening Words - Worship Associate Margaret Rieser
I am aware of what a privilege it is to be able to choose one's work.

I think of haying, making winter feed for cows and other animals when I think of work. My time in the hayfields is well spent.

Haying is mowing, turning, raking, baling and loading hay into storage space. Haying in Norway one summer, we raked the freshly cut grass and hung it in armloads on strands of wire, like hanging out clothes to dry. It was the women's work to rake and hang the grass. The day was warm and sunny, a rare and beautiful thing in that place. The women stripped down to their underthings as they worked; part of the local practice, old as the hills.

I love the dance of loading the hay, a task that can't be done alone. Someone drives the truck, moving carefully among the bales. Someone stacks the bales high. One or two people pick up the bales and heft them to the person stacking the load. The hefting is my job.

I love this work. It's steady and sweaty, and always in a gorgeous field. Haying is an essential skill, to which we can apply our seven guiding principles: Be considerate and appreciative of the team. Make sure they're drinking water and not doing your job for you. Encourage each other. Listen to your teammates ideas about how to make the process better. Take breaks when most people are ready to. Say out loud how awesome it is to work hard together on this fine day. Lastly, thank the earth for its bounty, and the cows, in advance, for the yogurt.

Sermon - All in a Day's Work

Why did my mother buy that painting? Late in life, my parents would drive south to warmer states to escape November in New England. Famously thrifty, they'd pack their own coffee, tea, frozen OJ, cereal, peanuts, dishes and silverware. And practical, they took pleasure in fitting my mother's little shoes into Dad's big shoes to save space. One year, they came home with a painting.

Not a pretty landscape of a place they'd visited, but a scene of Black men beating back a towering wall of fire and burning sugar canes, a mass of black smoke above their heads, machetes in their hands. I never liked it – it's hard to look at, hot and violent. But we still have it somewhere – and it came to mind as I read Khalil Muhammad's article about the sugar industry in the NYT special section a couple of weeks ago about the first days of slavery here 400 years ago.[1]

At first a luxury product enjoyed in tea, sweets and jams, sugar had become a valuable commodity worldwide by the 1700s. Sugar plantations in the Caribbean and the Americas were highly profitable for their colonizing owners. Producing sugar was brutally hard work and labor-intensive. Although modern methods have mechanized much of it today, the Louisiana sugar business remains a 24-hour operation, the work intense and harsh. In the early days, sugar used up people at a horrific rate. "Life expectancy," writes Prof. Muhammad, "was less like that on a cotton plantation and closer to that of a Jamaican cane field, where the most overworked and abused could drop dead after seven years."

Sugar canes, up to twenty feet tall, were hacked down with machetes or cane knives. There was no time to rest. Bulky and heavy, the canes had to get to the boiling house to be crushed immediately, or they would go bad. It was hard, dangerous work. The grinding gears of the crusher often caught hands and arms. Someone would stand by, ready to amputate.

In hot, crowded boiling houses – and many plantations had their own – cane juice was boiled down in a series of cauldrons. It took many strenuous hours. Women would stir and skim off impurities with long ladles and transfer gallons of boiling syrup, as it reduced and thickened, from one vat to the next. Eventually, a highly skilled worker, called the boiler, determined the exact moment when the thick dark syrup was ready to granulate. It would be poured into troughs, then molds and barrels, to dry out for weeks or months, yielding gravel-like sugary solids. Skimmings and molasses left over were distilled into rum.

Enslaved people also cultivated, weeded and irrigated the fields. The plantations were always expanding as sugarcane quickly depletes the soil. Enslaved people created rows of individual planting beds for each cane and dug holes for them one by one. Before the harvest, they'd light huge fires in the fields to remove the outer leaves of the stalks. Black foul-smelling clouds of smoke rained down ash. This practice still exists.

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[1] Khalil Gibran Muhammad, "The Barbaric History of Sugar in America," The 1619 Project, New York Times, 14 August 2019.

The sugar industry was one of many that depended on slavery. Matthew Desmond writes in the times, "In order to understand the brutality of American capitalism, you have to start on the plantation."[2] On cotton and indigo plantations, enslaved men, women and children were commodities, the primary goal to increase production, no matter the human cost. Plantations kept account books. You can see pages from them on line. Account books were standard, with blanks to be filled in with the name of the plantation, its owner, and the date.

One book recorded productivity: the first column had the name of each enslaved person, then across the page Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday – every day but Sunday – where the weight of each person's bag of picked cotton was recorded, the last column a weekly tally.

To increase productivity, the fields were worked in rows, the fastest picker always put at the head of the row. Overseers used the threat of violence to incentivize fast picking. They made an example of those who picked less cotton than they did the day before. Whipping – and punishments far worse – were common.

Another account book listed each enslaved person's worth, starting with the original purchase price paid for him or her. At regular increments as time went on, each person's current value was updated and recorded. You could see across the page each person's worth, quantified based on their production – an antecedent, if not the foundation, of modern corporate techniques of maximizing production and profitability. Certainly in those early days, it was purely about the numbers.

I've held one of those small black account books in my hands. Those first names, the women on one side, the men on the other, are chilling. Hannah, Sally, Janie….Nelson, Joe, Jim. No last name,they being the property (if not the issue for some) of an owner.

In a *Harvard Business Review* article, author Caitlin Rosenthal found plantation business practices "as sophisticated as what most firms do today." In her research, as she pored over account books, she'd imagine a slaveholder, maybe faraway in London, managing his inventory.

> Our management tools [she wrote] can separate us from our humanity. I keep going back to the absentee slave owner reading the numbers. I think of someone with a spreadsheet. The spreadsheet can create that same separation. When I'm reviewing the accounting records, I can get sucked into admiring the business acumen in the pages. But I always snap back to the fact that these were real people they were exploiting. The account books, strangely, remind me of the humanity of slaves, and that is absolutely necessary to remember. To never forget.[3]

The building industry also exploited people. Slave labor was used to build government buildings, institutions of higher learning, and presidential estates like Monticello. In *Black Men Built the Capitol,* African American journalist Jesse Holland writes:

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[2] Matthew Desmond, The 1619 Project, New York Times, 14 August 2019.

[3] Caitlin Rosenthal, "Plantations Practiced Modern Management." *Harvard Business Review*, September 2013 at https://hbr.org/2013/09/plantations-practiced-modern-management

> We now know that slaves baked the bricks used for the [Capitol] building's foundation and walls, sawed lumber for the interior wall and floors, dug the trenches for the foundation, worked the Virginia quarries where the sandstone was cut, and laid the stones that hold up the Capitol to this day.[4]

Enslaved people built and operated the four major railroad networks in North America. And at the Democratic National Convention in 2016, Michelle Obama made headlines saying, "…today, I wake up every morning in a house that was built by slaves…I watch my daughters, two beautiful, intelligent, black young women, playing with their dogs on the White House lawn."

Those days have gone by. They remain, however, foundational aspects of the culture in which we live. Cotton and sugar, part of our daily lives, are still immense, labor-intensive industries. The buildings constructed by nameless, faceless enslaved workers still sit at the center of our government and many of our universities – reminders of important truths. Labor practices employed from the beginning echo clearly in today's business world.

I like to think that the advances America celebrates this weekend reflect more than improvements in workers' rights, fair compensation, and worker safety. I like to think of the possibility of trending away from dehumanizing *some* people and moving toward recognizing the dignity and worth of *every* worker.

Colson Whitehead's newest book, called *The Nickel Boys*, starts with Elwood, a bright, idealistic Black boy, who receives for Christmas a record album of Martin Luther King, Jr. speeches. The album was "the best gift of his life… even if the ideas it put in his head were his undoing."[5] In one speech, Dr. King described how his daughter longed to go to an amusement park closed to Blacks. He counseled her "…to resist the lure of hatred and bitterness and assured her that 'Even though you can't go to Fun Town, I want you to know that you are as good as anybody who goes into Fun Town.' "[6]

Later in the story, Elwood does something on principle that gets him beaten up, and he remembers King's words:

> [He] had to admit [writes Whitehead]: From time to time it appeared that he had no goddamned sense. He couldn't explain it, even to himself, until [remembering the record album] gave him a language. *We must believe in our souls that we are somebody, that we are significant, that we are worthful and we must walk the streets of life every day with this sense of dignity and this sense of somebody-ness.* The record went around and around, like an argument that always returned to its unassailable premise….Elwood bent to a code – Dr. King gave that code shape, articulation, and meaning. There are big forces that want to keep the Negro down like Jim Crow, and there are small forces that want to

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[4] https://timeline.com/slave-national-monuments-built-de0c288a0c70

[5] Colson Whitehead, *The Nickel Boys*, NY: Doubleday, 2019, 12.
[6] Ibid.

> keep you down, like other people and in the face of…the big ones and the smaller ones, you have to stand up straight and maintain your sense of who you are.[7]

Every one of us has to maintain a sense of our somebody-ness. We lose track of it sometimes. With luck, we can remember a time someone saw something special in us, something all ours. Think of words of encouragement that you still remember, perhaps from long ago….

Whether we had to work right from the get-go and perhaps have made our way with work we've not loved, or whether we grew up with the privilege of being free to choose work we might love, let us appreciate each person's individuality and gifts. Let us appreciate the path that each person walks.

Especially in this season of reckoning with the consequences of slavery, let us make room within ourselves to also appreciate the somebody-ness of people once called slaves – and called slaves so unfairly. People may *be* enslaved, but no person *is* a slave.

DeReau Farrar, Music Director in a Portland, Oregon UU church, speaks to the strength of those people: "I love my blackness. The idea that blackness has been resilient enough to survive whiteness generation after generation, century after century, is enough to make me want to flaunt my blackness loudly and proudly."[8]

American culture places a premium on the individual. Some call this exceptionalism – the idea that this country and its people are "exceptional" – which really means more exceptional than others. This notion encourages people to express their unique, exceptional gifts and find work that is their bliss. To be able to choose one's work, however, as Margaret said earlier, is a privilege only some people enjoy.

We can agree that dehumanizing others flies in the face of anyone's exceptionalism, at any time in history. As for America, our origin stories of slavery and the genocide of indigenous peoples illuminate the dark side of exceptionalism. Better for our souls and better for each other, that, while doing our best to live into our values, we humbly look to see the light in every person.

I look forward to finding the painting of the sugar cane workers, their very lives at stake in that fire. Who were they? Whom did they love? Who are their people today? Perhaps my mother will tell me in a dream. This Labor Day, let us remember the precious somebody-ness of every worker.

So may it be.

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[7] Ibid., 86-7.

[8] https://www.firstunitarianportland.org/director-music-dereau-farrar-offers-testimony/