LOVE IN LABOR

Pilgrim Church, Duluth August 31, 1975 Dr. Royal F. Shepard, Jr.

As with most of our holidays these days there is very little connection between the way people celebrate Labor Day and the theme to which the day supposedly is devoted. The labor councils may organize a little speech-making and, during an election year, the candidates may offer a few remarks as well, but very few people pay much attention. I have often thought that Labor Day should be the one day of the year when nobody gets a day off. Then people might be led to contemplate the meaning of labor.

But under the circumstances not much attention is given to something the modern church calendars call "Labor Sunday." It was not always so. Back in the twenties and thirties progressive ministers nearly always prepared a Labor Day theme for the Sunday before the first Monday in September. Thus, in 1927 the Rev. Noble S. Elderkin preached here on "Labor's Love Not Lost." In 1930 his theme was, "If Labor Had Not Organized." In 1939 Thomas Craig McQueen took as his theme "Labor and the Future of America."

In the forties and fifties, however, the emphasis shifted from the societal to the personal. Inspired by such books as Elton Trueblood's Your Other Vocation, preachers were likely to speak on the theme of serving God in your daily work. The sixties brought us into another era of social concern. But with one notable exception, the labor movement was not the focus of that concern, and it is my impression that Labor Sunday received less and less attention.

I said, however, that there was one notable exception to the church's loss of concern about labor. It was almost exactly ten years ago that I attended the annual minister's retreat sponsored by our Northern California Conference in the hills north of San Francisco. Part of the program was a presentation by James Drake, a young minister serving with the California migrant ministry. He described a new departure in his work. Up until recently the ministry to farm workers in Tulare County was similar to that carried on by councils of churches in other areas. It was an educational and recreational ministry accompanied by very limited material assistance. The ministry carried on projects like distributing the little health kits put together by church women's groups and Sunday school children.

But as time went on many church workers came to the conclusion that this approach was of no avail in alleviating the fundamental predicament of the migrant families. These were families with an average total income of less than $2500 a year, an income that typically consisted of the combined earnings of both parents and all children over ten or eleven years of age. These people lived mostly in substandard housing equipped with only the crudest sort of sanitary facilities. Their children grew up without regular schooling. As workers they were excluded from most important labor legislation. They were not covered by minimum wage laws, by workmen's compensation or by provisions safeguarding the right to bargain collectively. They were afforded no paid holidays or vacations or rest periods, or pensions, or medical insurance or any of the other benefits routinely received by workers in other industries.

Added to these disadvantages in their relationships with their employers was a kind of outcaste status with respect to the communities in which they lived. These people belonged to racial and ethnic minorities. They were mostly Mexican Americans and Philippinos. At an earlier stage in California history they had been Chinese coolies imported and exploited for similar purposes. Factors of social prejudice combined with the uprootedness of a migrant life to exclude the migrants from any significant participation in the communities where they lived and worked.

When we lived in southern Wisconsin my wife was active in a program aimed at the needs of Mexican-American workers in that area. Among other things we learned that local barbers would not give the migrant men haircuts, that by order of the city health officer, migrant children were denied access to the municipal swimming pool. Attitudes in California were similar. A leading California physician told me that some hospitals and physicians in the central valley refused to provide treatment for these people. And, of course, they had little if any share in local government.

In 1962 the United Church of Christ combined with the State Council of Churches to initiate a community development program in a place called Goshen. The aim was to help the farm workers organize on a county-wide basis to cope with problems of housing, health, education and other needs. Two years later Jim Drake was employed to work in the area around the town of Porterville. His work was supported jointly by the Board for Homeland Ministries, the Northern California Conference and the Porterville Congregational Church. Within a few months, however, the Porterville Church voted to withdraw the $3,000 they were contributing to Jim Drake's salary. They discovered that he was not sticking to toothpaste and crayons. His ministry was taking an alarming turn.

At that ministers' retreat Jim Drake informed us that he and other ministers working with the migrants concluded that the best way to help the migrants effectively was to join forces with Caesar Chavez anD his recently organized Farm Workers Association. The simple truth was that these people had no power. They had no power in relation to their employers. They were not bricklayers or auto-workers whose interests were served by established unions that some impartial observers might even regard as too powerful. These people wielded no collective influence at all with respect to their employers. Nor were their employers mainly old-fashioned family farmers. Increasingly they were huge conglomerates with offices in San Francisco and New York. Their situation with respect to local government was similar. By and large the people who ran those governments saw themselves serving the interests of the growers, not of Mexican migrants.

The simple truth was that these people had no power. They would continue to be misused and mistreated until they banded together to muster the kind of power, economic and political that would enable them to deal effectively with employers and community officials.

This, as I understand it, was the basic rationale behind Jim Drake's decision to work with Caesar Chavez.

Well, of course, all hell broke loose. The only person who got much excited that day was a minister sitting next to me. He had newly arrived from the Midwest to serve a large German background congregation in the wine-growing community of Lodi. Already he found himself caught in the middle. I note from the Yearbook that he is still in Lodi, which is amazing.

But as time went on a great many other people got excited. There were few if any Mexican farm workers who were members of United Churches of Christ. But there were plenty of growers and other people whose economic interests were closely tied to those of growers. And even where there was no very direct tie, something else emerged, as I noted in my own congregation. People who had nothing to do with agriculture and who were not even in management positions in private industry, nevertheless felt very threatened by the church's taking the side of labor. They felt that the interests of their class were being betrayed by one of their class institutions - the Protestant Church. Of course, they did not express themselves in those terms. But that is what their feelings came down to.

It must be admitted there were many difficult issues bound up with the larger issue of helping Farm Workers organize. There was the plight of the small growers who might be forced out of business by high wage agreements. There were dire predictions of increased mechanization that would leave the farm workers without any jobs at all. There was the seasonal nature of agriculture, which made employers especially vulnerable at harvest-time to the weapon of the strike. There was the question of whether the nation-wide grape, lettuce and wine boycotts were fair methods of winning the struggle. Ironically the farm workers were able to use the boycott legally because they were not covered by the National Labor Relations Act. When the Teamsters Union moved in, the question arose as to which union was the better representative of both worker and public interests and of whether the church should choose between them. There was concern about the effect of unionization upon food prices. Finally, there was and is the basic issue of whether the church should not seek to understand the needs of growers as well as of workers and to minister to both parties.

As you know, or should know, this agonizing struggle with all its side issues continues. So does the involvement of our church in the agony. The 1973 General Synod sent 95 of its delegates by chartered plane to stand on the picket lines in the UFW-Teamsters dispute. One of the pickets was our now Conference Minister, Frank Pirazzini. At least one of our members here, I believe, looks for the Aztec eagle label before she buys lettuce or table grapes. I presume she abstains as well from Gallo wine. Just last week a new California law went into effect which the United Farm Workers see as a partial victory. It allows for secret ballot election on the choice of a union or of no union at all.

It might be said that for the last decade our church has been in an anguish of labor over an issue of labor. But there is something more far-reaching in all this than the rightness or wrongness of the Farm Labor Movement. That far-reaching factor dawned on me as I sat there listening to Jim Drake ten years ago.

Traditionally we have viewed the role of the church as one of reconciling love. To us is entrusted, says the Apostle, "a ministry of reconciliation." The task of the church and of Christians generally is to bring people together, not to polarize them. Where there is conflict involving questions of justice we are to try to illuminate the issues and to achieve mutual understanding. But we are not to take sides. "Blessed are the peacemakers," says the Lord, "for they shall be called children of God."

Now the migrant ministers were announcing a departure from that traditional role as most of us had understood that role. They were saying that in this situation the church must take sides. This didn't mean that we

should close our minds to the viewpoint of the growers or stop trying to minister to them. It did mean that if Christian love is to be effective in practice it must throw its weight behind obtaining power for the powerless. Otherwise no meaningful reconciliation can prevail.

That was the train of thought I saw developing that day ten years ago. It troubled me. Initially I opposed it. I saw that it led to a Pandora's box of temptations and abuses. All my fears on that score have been realized in the years since. Yet I also began to see, very dimly then, that this turning point in the thinking of some Christians was the most important turning point in Christian thought and action of our time. It reached far beyond the Farm Workers Movement. It entered into every situation where Christians were seeking to liberate the bound, to empower the powerless, to establish righteousness and justice in the world.

I began to see that the hard truth was that to talk only of reconciliation was to evade the real issue. It was in fact to help perpetuate situations of oppression. "Cris" Hartmire, the head of the California Migrant Ministry, made this point in October, 1965 in a letter to the Los Angeles TIMES.

> "If we are concerned with justice then we should support the workers' right to have organized strength to balance their employer's power and make equal negotiations possible. The alternative is to sponsor conversations between decision-makers and powerless individual workers, the result of which can only be 'reconciling' the worker to his poverty and weakness."

Unless love expresses itself through the quest for justice it is not authentic love at all. And justice cannot be achieved by love unless love faces the realities of power and takes the risk of grasping power. The aim cannot be to reconcile the weak to their weakness. The aim must be to reconcile the powerful to what is just. Only then can there be Christian reconciliation between conflicting parties.

Such was the basic insight emerging from the migrant ministry. It was not a new insight for Christians. It was as old as Jesus Christ; indeed, as old as Moses. But it was an insight rarely put into practice.

More recently the same insight is voiced again by the liberation theology guiding Christian revolutionary movements in Latin America. In our country, the best known spokesman for this outlook is Father Gustavo Gutierrez of Perul. He writes:

> "...Christian love...does not mean preserving a fictitious harmony. Universal love is that which in solidarity with the oppressed seeks also to liberate the oppressors from their own power, from their ambition, from their selfishness."

Another member of this new force in Christian life and thought is Professor Jose Bonino of Argentina. He writes of the Latin American struggle, "Love which intends to be effective in terms of God's kingdom cannot avoid taking sides."

Where grave issues of justice and oppression are at stake, Christian love must take sides in the struggle for power. This is the doctrine newly

emphasized today in many parts of the world. As I said, this doctrine is subject to many abuses. But I think it is the most significant doctrine of the age in which we live - and we shall see much more of it in action in those tumultuous years ahead of us.

We live in a time when Christian love confronting the plight of the needy and oppressed and faced wihh societies in conflict finds itself in the anguish of labor. Christian love is in travail, bringing to birth a new child. This new child is not soft and rosy. He is hard and thorny. This child does not continually babble the word "love" like the songs in musical comedies. Rather he cries out for justice, for sacrifice, for freedom, for equality, for power for the people. This child does not lie placidly in the middle. This child takes sides.

It is a strange child that Christian love has been breeding in our time. Yet he is a child of love. And when the time comes that justice and freedom prevail in the world, we shall discover that he is the gift of love and the only legitimate heir to peace.