

The Rev. Angela Herrera

First Unitarian Church

You may have heard the phrase “protestant work ethic” before. The idea has to do with the Reformation—that world-changing moment when there was a formal break within the Catholic Church, and Protestant Christianity was launched. We’ll talk more about the reformation on its 500th anniversary next month. It’s an important piece of our own UU history. Although we do not consider ourselves a Christian church because we embrace much more theological diversity than that label implies, but we are a Protestant church.

But what does protestant work ethic mean? Where did that come from?

The Catholicism that dominated Europe before the reformation considered good works (including hard work) an important part of faith. It was seen as a fitting response to, or even a manifestation of, the gift of faith that people had received from God. Being hard working was a sign of being a faithful and good Christian.

Then Protestantism came along with some challenging new ideas. It was spurred largely by outrage at priests who were selling indulgences. The priests would encourage people to pay money to the church as a way of making reparations with God for sins they had committed. In other words, you could mess up and then buy yourself an early release from hell or purgatory.

This did not sit well with folks who didn’t have a lot of money, and it seemed to condone harsher punishments for poor people than rich ones. Why should the rich be let off easy? Didn’t Jesus say it would be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter heaven? Nobody reads that part of the scripture in church.

Protestantism arose in outrage to that. In protest. *Protestantism*.

I wish I could say that the poor and the rich now face the same consequences for their actions, but one look at who is incarcerated in this country is all the evidence you need to see that we still privilege the wealthy over everyone else.

Protestantism also challenged the role of the priests. People no longer had to pay priests indulgences or even go to them at all to make amends for sin. People could have a direct relationship with God. And Protestantism also shifted the thinking about work, especially the strain known as Calvinism.

As soon as the protestant church was launched, naturally, there were different stripes within it.

Calvinism is one that Puritans would take across the Atlantic, colonize the area we now call New England, and--as Dan suggested--they’d go on to have a lasting impact on our country’s dominant culture.

According to Calvinism, God has already predestined a certain number of people to go to heaven. You don't know if you're one of them, unless you live a bad life, in which case everyone can tell you're not.

Calvinists threw themselves into hard work, frugality, and self-restraint, trying to at least *look* like candidates for salvation. Trying to keep that option on the table for themselves.

Working very hard took on an especially pious—perhaps almost competitively pious— glow.

The Puritans, those Calvinists, are the direct religious ancestors of Unitarian Universalists. If you're hearing that for the first time, you might be going WHAT?

That's right. The Puritans were our people, people. It's a long story how we got from there to here, but their impact on the formation of this country does explain a lot about why Americans tend to work more than people in other developed countries, and why many of us feel guilty or uncomfortable about taking a full share of time off, and, you know, resting. Or even recreating.

Well, working a lot was fine while people were plowing and growing and tending little markets. But with industrialization in the 1800's, we got big factories, and the long hours there weren't like long hours in other places. Indoors, away from family, repetitive. Big companies sprang up and profited off of their poorly paid workers.

Enter labor unions.

People organized for decent wages, humane hours, and something called the weekend.

I don't really understand this weekend thing. People are like "TGIF! Thank God it's Friday," and I'm like "SUNDAY IS COMING." What are they talking about? Dan, do you know?

It is thanks to labor unions that we have standards for many jobs, like the notion of a 40 hour workweek, and the idea of weekends, and Labor Day. A holiday to recognize the role of labor in continually creating this country.

And we *are* continuously creating it. No feeling, no policy, no shameful situation is final. We're gonna keep on moving forward.

Of course, even before we had the idea of weekends, there was the Sabbath.

And work isn't always just work...

There is a parable about two Buddhist monks who both liked to smoke. A lot. Like, all the time. Concerned about whether it was permissible to smoke during their long periods of prayer, they each agreed to consult with their superiors. One was told that in no uncertain terms that smoking was prohibited. The other received praise

and a pat on the back. Confused, the disappointed monk asked his friend exactly what he had said to the abbot. His friend replied, “I asked him whether it is okay to pray while smoking.”

That’s a naughty little parable, isn’t it?

Don’t take it literally. The point is, we can enjoy life while working if we adopt the right mindset about it.

Even if we do, we still need a balance of rest.

These days, there is a movement to ensure all workers have the right to earn a living wages, so that people can get by on something like a 40-hour work week, and not have to hold down two or three jobs. I know some of us in this room work jobs that wouldn’t pay the rent if you only worked “full time.” I’ve worked those jobs too. I cleaned houses and worked as a caregiver for ten years while my husband and I gradually got ourselves through college.

The new movement for worker justice also calls for paid sick leave, because no one should have to choose between taking a sick day and paying the heat bill. This is the next evolution of the American labor movement, which intentionally left many people out in the past, often based on race.

In exactly one month, on October 3, Albuquerque residents will have the opportunity to vote on something called the Healthy Workforce Ordinance, which would mandate that employers in Albuquerque provide paid sick leave to employees.

In an op ed in the Albuquerque Journal, Adriann Barboa, tells the story of her grown son who had to have emergency surgery, and then went straight back to work the next day—all swollen and on meds—instead of resting like his doctor instructed, because if he missed a day of work he wouldn’t be able to pay his bills.¹ No paid sick leave.

That kind of thing is especially hard on parents, too, who in addition to compromising their own health, may have to send their kids to school sick rather than staying home with them, in order to be able to put food on the table.

Adriann is the Director of Strong Families New Mexico, an advocacy group that works for the well being of diverse families. Families are the very fabric of our country.

¹ Barboa, Adriann | Albuquerque. “OPINION | We are familia: The health of our communities is non-Negotiable.” *Albuquerque Journal*, 26 Aug. 2017, www.abqjournal.com/1053766/we-are-familia-the-health-of-our-communities-is-nonnegotiable.html. Accessed 1 Sept. 2017.

Some in the business community are complaining about how much it will cost them to give everyone sick leave.² Some have said they're afraid if they have to fire someone who took sick leave it will look like they are punishing them for it and they'll be sued and it will destroy Albuquerque's economy.³ Seriously. I guess they don't keep good records and they don't want to.

Here at First Unitarian, we already offer paid sick leave to employees working 20 hours or more, and we support flexible scheduling for employees who work less, so they can make up missed hours as needed. It means sometimes we have to live with getting a little less done so that we can take care of people. We also maintain good records. But that's just doing what's right.

It's wrong to treat people like they are just means to your end. We have to respect each other's humanity, worth, and dignity.

That's one of the reasons First Unitarian has recently been awarded New Mexico's Family Friendly Business designation.

You can read the proposed ordinance and the debate, compare it to what we do here at the church, and decide what you think. I hope you'll vote on October 3. We need to vote every single time there's an election. About anything! That's the way forward, friends.

To our friends who are listening at the branch congregations in Socorro and Edgewood: I checked and you don't have a municipal election coming up right now. But you will! And you need to vote, too. Every time.

There's one more thing I want to say about the dominant American culture's take on work: it's very individualistic. Even though workers are part of continuously creating our country, that's not how we usually talk about it. If we did, we'd have the good of the whole in mind, starting with families. Instead, the dominant culture is all about personal achievement, the myth of the independent, self-made person, and especially about trying to accumulate wealth.

Those values are what we see reflected in our policies that prioritize convenience or extra wide profit margins over the wellbeing of workers and families. It runs like a zero sum game—if one person gives something up—like a business owner giving employees sick leave—they feel they've lost something.

In her book *Salsa, Soul, and Spirit*, Juana Bordas contrasts this tendency with subtler cultures within the US: African-American, Native-American, and Latin-American cultures, where relationships and the good of the whole, not individual gain, are most valued.

² Espinoza, Jason. "Viewpoint: Businesses, beware ABQ's toxic sick-Leave ballot measure." *Bizjournals.com*, 1 June 2017, www.bizjournals.com/albuquerque/news/2017/06/01/viewpoint-businesses-beware-abqs-toxic-sick-leave.html. Accessed 7 Sept. 2017.

³ Regrettably, I was unable to relocate the opinion piece that made this drastic statement for a citation.

Isn't that what we need right now? To tend relationships and care for the good of the whole. I'll talk more about that next Sunday, in a sermon called Hope.

Until then, may your work and rest be for wholeness.