

# A Labor Day Challenge

*Co-Missioners,*

For many of us, this past Sunday brought the interesting coincidence of America's Labor Day weekend with a hearing of [Luke 14:7-14](#), as appointed in the Revised Common Lectionary.

The text presents a saying of Jesus in two parts. The first, cast as a parable, addresses how to behave as a guest at someone else's banquet. The point seems to drive at our conduct in the presence of the One from whom all banquets flow. "Don't vaunt yourself. Trust God to lift you up." The second part speaks to the behavior of hosts when they throw their own parties. "Make like the Host of hosts. Invite the poor, the lame, the blind, the nobodies." Trust God and spread the wealth, in other words.

Enter Labor Day, of all American holidays the most despised by plutocrats, as a nagging reminder of the ongoing mess that Jesus' words address. Neither trusting God nor thinking much to honor Christ, the "haves" continue to dribble out as little as they can get away with to the "have-nots." One could mount a thick, solid argument that this applies across the political spectrum. Contrary to one wing of current opinion, generosity is not an exclusive virtue of the far left, nor is stinginess an exclusive sin of the far right. Where fairness is concerned, all continue to sin, falling ever so short of the glory of God. See, for example, how churches of every hue tend to pay their secretaries and janitors.

Or imagine, for that matter, what it's like to be stuck these days in a fast-food job. That's the topic of today's essay by Martin Rafanan, a Seminex graduate and ELCA pastor who delivered these remarks at a Crossings workshop in January, 2017. There is much here to chew on. We expect that more than a few of you will

find the taste unpleasant in places. There is next to nothing of explicit theology here, for example. There is, by contrast, a lot of social and political analysis of the sort one hears in self-styled “progressive” circles that causes teeth to grind in other circles. Yet beneath it looms a report about an aspect of present reality that our Lord’s remarks this Sunday past were surely aimed at—and for that it bears reading, and not just reading, but some prayer and repentance too. A way to start with the latter this very week, perhaps, is by a conscious effort to remember that the person shoving that bag at you through the drive-thru window is another person Jesus died for.

*Peace and Joy,*

*The Crossing Community*

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## **Fast Food and Low Wage Workers: Remarks at a Crossings Workshop**

**by Martin Rafanan**



Photo by [Tetiana Shevereva](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Today, I speak with you as an organizer of community support for fast food and other low wage workers. I talk with [grass-tops](#) leaders around the state to encourage their advocacy on behalf of low wage workers both as they are in action on the streets in wildcat strikes and in actions to build better public policy. In this work, I represent an organization that is one of the treasures of our state: [Missouri Jobs with Justice](#), a coalition of over 100 community, faith, labor and academic organizations representing over 120,000 people across Missouri.

My conversation with you—and it should be that, a dialogue—is about the power for good and for economic justice in the

struggle of fast food and other low wage workers who are rising up around the country demanding better wages and a union. It is a good time to reflect on workers who are struggling for better wages and protections in the workplace especially as we continue to consider the potentials of a new administration. The question that we must answer is how we dismantle structural inequality that produces such extraordinary disparities, especially across lines of race, gender and class, in order to build a more just and equitable society that strengthens and upholds ALL of our lives and not just a few.

The good news I want to share with you is that when workers fight for their rights and are joined by the community, we win. We win for workers, their families, and our communities, and that INCLUDES all of us. Let's be clear that workers include all of us—those that get a paycheck and those who do not. Each of us is blessed by God with agency—the ability to do something with our lives that builds our community and supports others in that work. Our work is a sacred gift from God, and we honor work through reflection on our vocation/calling and our commitment to human rights as we build our community not only for ourselves but for all who share our planet and those who will follow us in generations yet to come.

In September of 2015, we had a victory in St. Louis. Fast food and low wage workers in coalition with Missouri Jobs with Justice and other partners passed a bill in the Board of Alderpersons in St. Louis that will increase the minimum wage to \$11 by 2018. This is a significant win as it signals the political will not only of the people in St. Louis but of this state who, by an overwhelming margin, favor increasing the minimum wage. However, to demonstrate how far we need to go, that \$11 minimum wage to be achieved by 2018 has little more buying power than the \$1.65 cent minimum wage I made as a stock clerk in 1969 and is nowhere near a living wage in the City of

St. Louis. What is needed in St. Louis for a worker to support themselves and one child without using government assistance is about \$22 an hour. We take small steps and the journey toward economic justice continues to stretch out before us.

I served as a parish pastor in a predominantly African-American Lutheran congregation in the northern part of St. Louis across from O'Fallon Park for 20 years;



moved into social service as a statewide organizer for faith communities and then an Executive Director for 20 years. I was at [Gateway180 :: Homelessness Reversed](#), the state's largest shelter for women and children, for 5 years before moving into the work of supporting fast food workers around the country. Why? Because of mothers in the shelter I served in downtown St. Louis—mothers working full time, overtime and part time to make ends meet so that their families could experience a better life.

Many of these mothers were doing everything possible to care for themselves and their families but could not take steps forward in their lives or build a better life for their children. The reason for this: poverty wages being paid by some of the most profitable corporations in the land—Target, McDonald's, Express Scripts, Wells-Fargo, Walmart, and the list goes on. These women, many of whom worked in the fast food industry (the



average age of a woman working in fast food in St. Louis is 32 with children) helped me to understand that no matter how good a charitable system is, it cannot address the needs of the millions of poor workers who are caught in a system that enslaves them, depresses their wages, and abuses their bodies in the name of profit.

In the Fall of 2012, I went to New York to stand with 400 fast food workers who struck their restaurants. I listened to their stories as they called our nation to a deeper understanding of economic justice. Here's what I heard. You can't survive on \$7.25, the federal minimum wage. With no paid sick leave, no benefits, and only part time work, it is impossible to cobble together a working life that is anything but oppressive and cruel (and I should add, dangerous, for both workers and the public). With no control over hours and no voice in the workplace, workers face discrimination, wage theft, no treatment for injuries, unlawful termination, and no ability to organize for better treatment. It is what many of our young activist fast food leaders call "modern day slavery."



As they chronicled the struggles they face with their low wages and lack of voice in the workplace, they also brought attention to the growing income inequality we see in our country and its dangers for all of us—the fact that the top 5% of wage earners have seen their wages increased by 130% in the last 30 years while the wage earners in the bottom 40% have seen their wages flat-line relative to inflation. Even worse, the lowest wage workers have seen their wages decrease in value by 20%. Of course, the facts were always

there to be seen but few had the “eyes to see” until fast food workers told their personal stories. The power and courage of their witness changed the narrative from what was “budget cutting” in 2012 to “what does it take to really have a living wage” in this country and “if you work 40 hours a week, should you have enough to take care of yourself and your family?” That we are asking these questions as a nation is a testament to their ongoing struggle and fortitude.

In addition, they called us to analyze how companies continue to make huge profits as they depress wages—it is part of a diabolically-conceived scheme that puts citizens like you and me into the role of subsidizing their profits. In the last quarter of 2015, McDonald’s made a \$1.8B profit (I’m not counting the comparable amount of money they pay their stockholders through share buy-backs and dividends). In 2015, McDonald’s workers received \$1.3B in food stamps, healthcare support, and Earned Income Tax Credits because they can’t survive on the low wages received from the fast food giant. We increase the bottom-line of the company not only by purchasing their product but with our tax dollars for government assistance programs that keep poor workers from falling deeper into poverty. In addition, our communities spend at least an equal amount and perhaps quite a bit more money locally to provide support to low wage workers through food support, homeless and social service systems, emergency care and health care assistance. This is money that is desperately needed to build our community education, infrastructure and cultural amenities. Equity is ripped from our community without our ability to see or understand what’s happening. Fast food workers have pulled the curtain on this Wizard of Oz corporate welfare and it’s not a pretty sight.

Here’s how David Cooper of the Economic Policy Institute described [our situation in 2015](#):

Social Security was by far the most powerful anti-poverty program in the United States last year, keeping 25.9 million people out of poverty. Refundable tax credits, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and the Child Tax Credit, kept 9.8 million people out of poverty. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), aka food stamps, kept 4.7 million people out of poverty, while other targeted programs (such as housing subsidies, unemployment insurance, and school lunch programs) made it possible for millions more to keep their heads above water.

In 2014, 48.4 million people (or 15.3 percent of the US population) were in poverty, as measured by the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM)—a more sophisticated approach for measuring economic well-being than the official federal poverty line. However, that number would have been significantly higher were it not for programs like the ones listed above. In the absence of stronger wage growth for low and middle-income workers, these safety-net programs play an increasingly important role in helping struggling families afford their basic needs. [1]

The cost of changing this would be minimal. According to a [2015 study conducted at Purdue University](#), McDonald's can pay a living wage of \$15 and include healthcare support for all of its workers by adding a 4.3% increase to each purchase in its stores. [2] For a #2 meal at today's prices, that would be an increase of 18 cents, allowing McDonalds to maintain its current profit levels. The reason it will not do this is that it





would empower workers to dismantle what is a very profitable structure, designed to keep workers depressed and keep them alienated from one another. McDonald's is not ideologically opposed to unions and pays much better wages and benefits in many parts of the world. However, it knows that, in the U.S., its ability to keep unions from forming decreases its labor costs and increases its profits dramatically. In Denmark, Japan and Australia, McDonald's workers make a living wage and have benefits because they have unions.

On this front, workers are fighting McDonald's by seeking and winning a ruling from the National Labor Relations Board that now has stated that McDonald's the corporation is a co-employer of McDonald's workers along with the franchise. This ruling was won because thousands of cases of wage theft, unlawful termination, OSHA violations, and discrimination in the workplace have been filed by workers, demonstrating that something must be done to bring greater balance to the economic power equation in major corporations.

In addition, the courage, fortitude and leadership of fast food and low wage workers played an integral role in creating the social justice movement that we call Black Lives Matter. Many of the young leaders in the streets of Ferguson were fast food workers who had been in the streets for over two years as activists prior to the Michael Brown shooting. They were the leaders in the non-violent protest of ongoing systemic, structural oppression throughout our community demonstrated in police-and-judicial system misconduct endemic not only in Ferguson and the St Louis region but throughout our nation. In addition, they have pointed to the need to support worker-organizing as integral to moving our communities forward economically, leading to a movement called [Black Workers Matter](#).

Finally, and here's where you come in:

Their call to faith leaders has been a call to our moral and faith commitment to build a more just economy. That means we start by putting our bodies on the line with fast food workers. The physical, emotional and psychological attack on person-of-color bodies has had a long history in our nation: lynching, Jim Crow, being targeted by police and the criminal justice system, slavery in the economic system, targeting through ongoing public policy that keep disparities in place in housing, education, wealth-production and community building, thus keeping Black wealth and wages depressed while increasing the wealth of the advantaged to obscene levels. This attack on Black bodies is an attack on The Body of all who pursue justice and equity.



Photo by Life Matters from Pexels

Ta-Nehisi Coates eloquently describes this attack on the Black body in his new book, [\*Between the World and Me\*](#): “White America is a syndicate arrayed to protect its exclusive power to dominate and control our bodies. Sometimes this power is direct (lynching), and sometimes it is insidious (redlining). But however it appears, the power of domination and exclusion is central to the belief in being white, and without it, ‘white People’ would cease to exist for want of reasons.” Again, “Americans have built an empire on the idea of ‘race,’ a falsehood that damages us ALL but falls most heavily on the bodies of black women and men—bodies exploited through slavery and segregation, and, today, threatened, locked up, and murdered out of all proportion. What is it like to inhabit a black body and find a way to live within it? And how can we all honestly reckon with this fraught history and free ourselves from its burden?”

My answer to that question has been suggested to me by Black and Brown workers who are fighting for better wages and a union. They ask us to put our bodies on the line with them to advocate “stand alongside” brothers and sisters who fighting for economic justice. When they strike, we join them and return them to their jobs. When they go to jail, we go to jail. When they are fired or experience retaliation of any kind, we fight with them to create change. When they lead a public policy debate, we have their backs and work to achieve their next step. When they suffer for whatever reason, we understand, we learn, we serve, we support. The time has come for new leadership in the social justice movement, and we need to figure out how to stand alongside.

The calling I have today from my church and my community is to call labor, faith, community and academic leaders to “stand alongside.” To use their extensive social capital – those quiet networks of professional contacts, friends of friends and well-

placed family members— to support and build the movement. The social capital in this room, shared across affluent neighborhoods, passed down through generations, opening doors for its lucky recipients to prestigious internships, informational interviews and unadvertised job opportunities—must be turned into the building blocks of a much more inclusive movement of Black Lives Matter and Black Workers Matter. We need to figure out how to institutionalize programs that spread social capital across racial, ethnic and income lines. While no single strategy can combat deep-rooted racism, access to networks and social capital opens an important pathway for diverse young people.

It is important that we stand with workers and with their organizations to oppose further erosion of union rights and strengths. The current “Right to Work” movement, organized by the American Legislative Exchange Council and Americans for Prosperity, front groups for corporations and wealthy individuals, are seeking to destabilize unions by allowing workers to avoid paying for services that unions, under law, must provide. The result, at least in the near term, is to disrupt union solidarity, decrease wages and benefits, and make it more difficult for workers to organize and collectively bargain. It is critical that workers be supported in their efforts to fight for better compensation through their constitutional right to organize and collectively bargain.

The fight for 15 and a union is the clearest expression of the struggle for economic justice in our midst and it is our opportunity for blessing to be a part of it. To that end, I invite you to join the movement. Recommit to working for structural reform in our democratic systems so that workers maintain their right to organize and collectively bargain. Support striking workers by accompanying them as they return to their jobs after a legal, one-day strike. Stand with workers and

encourage their efforts. Together, we win not only for low wage workers but for our entire community.

### **Endnotes:**

[1] David Cooper, "Without Government Safety Net Programs, Millions More Would Be in Poverty" (Economic Policy Institute: <https://tinyurl.com/yysl82y8>), September 22, 2015

[2] Greg McClure, "Study: Raising Wages to \$15 an Hour for Limited-service Restaurant Employees Would Raise Prices 4.3 Percent" (Purdue University: <https://tinyurl.com/o7edazr>), July 27, 2015. Here are the pertinent paragraphs from McClure's report:

Raising wages to \$15 an hour for limited-service restaurant employees would lead to an estimated 4.3percent increase in prices at those restaurants, according to a recent study.

Researchers from Purdue University's School of Hospitality and Tourism Management also examined the impact of limited-service restaurants offering health-care benefits and found that, due to current tax credits in the Affordable Care Act, there would be a minimal effect on prices at limited-service restaurants with fewer than 25 full-time employees.

Limited-service restaurants are what many consumers refer to as "fast-food restaurants," where there usually is no tableside service and no tipping.

The study says increasing wages to \$22 an hour, which the Bureau of Labor Statistics says is what the average American private industry employee makes, would cause a 25 percent increase in prices.

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**Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use**  
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