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The Served as the Server By James L. Holly, MD Labor Day, September 7, 2009 *The Examiner*

Labor Day – what images come to your mind when you hear the word? What do you celebrate on the day set aside to remember “labor?” Is it just the last holiday before the “big three” – Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Years? Certainly, Labor Unions come to mind. Their contributions to America’s progress and strength have been prodigious. But what always seems to come to mind first are those whom we see as laborers; those who labor serving the needs of others.

The Served as the Server

And, here is the reality, at one time, we are each a laborer serving others, no matter what our occupation, and at another time, we are each being served by another who is a laborer. The key to celebrating the real meaning of Labor Day is that on this day, we see others through the eyes of another.

“I wish she’d get my tea to the table!” “I can’t believe this bread is cold!” “I distinctly remember telling her ‘no cheese.’ That sure looks like cheese on my burger.” And so, regardless of how we earn our “bread and cheese,” we sit at a table as one being served by a laborer, who in this setting is called a “waitress,” or to be more politically correct, a “waitperson.”

Fast forward to a visit to the Mall two days later – “Isn’t that the waitress from the restaurant?” asks the wife, as she and her husband walk down the center of the Mall. “It is.” “Look at that little girl who is holding her hand. She is looking up at that waitress like the whole world is contained in that face.”

You and Me Against the World

As the couple watches, the waitress and her daughter sit on a bench and they over hear the little girl say, “Tell me again Mommy...” At which prompting the waitress-mother sings softly the words of a song which the couple had not heard in years. She sings:

“You and me against the World
Sometimes it feels like..You and me against the World
When all the others turn their backs and walk away,
you can count on me to stay.

“Remember when the Circus came to Town...
and you were frightened by the clown,
wasn't it nice to be around someone that you knew?
Someone who was big and strong and looking out for you and me
Against the World

“Sometimes it feels like you and me against the World
and for all the times we cried,
I always felt that God was on our side

“And when one of us is gone,
and one of us is left to carry on
Then remembering will have to do
Our Memories alone will get us through
Think about the days of me and you,
You and Me against the World

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Our Memories alone will get us through

“Think about the days of Me and You...
You and Me Against The World.”

The waitress, who has now transformed into a mother in the eyes of the couple who had been being served, hugged her little girl, who said, “I love you, Mommy.” With a tear flowing down her cheek, the mother said, “I love you too, Baby.”

The Served Become the Ally of the Server

A week later, the couple was back in the same restaurant. A mother walked up to their table and said, “I am going to be your server.” The couple didn’t reveal their witnessing of that precious moment between this “server” and her daughter, but they now knew they were being helped by a mother, who is the world to a little girl. When the meal was over, they looked at each other and smiled as they rewarded the imperfect service to them with a gratuity worthy of the perfect service this mother gives to her daughter. The gratuity was not given grudgingly but joyfully and it was larger than they had ever given to any one who served them. As they walked out of the restaurant, for the first time in years, hand-in-hand, they smiled at every one, as they served strangers with an encouraging greeting.

The previous story is imagined, the following one is not. Some years ago, a lady worked for my wife and me as a housekeeper. Our children did not call her by her first name as they would not any adult. We introduced her as Mrs. _____, when we had guest. She was reliable and hardworking. She did a task which some would call menial but we did not. In addition to caring for our home, she often cared for our children, which was no menial task, as they are our greatest treasures. I remember when we attended a family celebration in her church. This lady who had served us for years, morphed into an elegant lady who was articulate, who was looked up to by others. She was the “queen bee,” being served by others and the day was not even in her honor but she was deferred

to and addressed with respect. This laborer, was being served. Our respect for her grew as we saw her through the eyes of others.

Seeing Others Through the Eyes of Another

The medical group where I work employs several hundred people. Often I kibitz with those with whom I work every day, but I always do it with the knowledge that to a little girl, to a little boy, or to several children, they are the world. I want to make sure that when they go home in the evening, it is with a spring in their step and a smile on their face for the little ones to whom their services is vastly more important than what they do for me.

As each of us are at once the served and again the server – the laborer -- it reminds me of the ultimate example of the dichotomy of at one time being the served and at another being the server. Jürgen Moltmann wrote a book entitled, *The Crucified God*. Grappling with the Gospel of Christ he argued that Christ went to those who were “other” than Himself. He, Who could lay claim to being the Ultimate Served, became the Server. He saw us through the eyes of Another Who loved us and to Whom we are the world.

In the same context Ernst Kasemann addressed the concept of worship in his *Commentary on Romans*, where he said:

“...Paul takes the guiding theme of spiritual worship as may be seen from what is said about the living and well-pleasing sacrifice...Yet, Paul also parts company with mysticism by incorporating all life and stressing corporeality as the...sphere of this worship... Christian worship does not consist of what is practiced at sacred sites, at sacred times, and with sacred acts. It is the offering of the bodily existence in the otherwise profane sphere. As something constantly demanded this takes place in daily life, whereby every Christian is simultaneously sacrifice and priest. Here the universal priesthood of all believers is proclaimed of which I Peter 3:8 can even speak in terminology taken from sacral law.”

Complex language perhaps, but the basic concepts are, for Moltmann, that we act divinely when we see those who appear different from us as the same as us, i.e., when we see the server as one worthy of our service,. Thus perceiving them so, we serve them by our kindness and graciousness in their service to us. For Kasemann, worship of God is most clearly done as we serve others with our acceptance, kindness and graciousness, even when they are the server and we are the served.

This Labor Day, perhaps each of us could see others through the eyes of another. Perhaps we can see others who serve us, who labor for us, through the eyes of my father who first seeing my mother as a young waitress in Kingsville Café, did not see a person to use, but as a person to know and then as a person with whom to spend the next 64 years of his life.

Happy Labor Day!