

I check in now and then on a blog that used to be called “Five Kids Is A Lot of Kids” and now goes simply by “Beth Woolsey dot com.” Beth Woolsey is a Christian who started out in the conservative church and has gradually become progressive. She’s kind of funny and self-deprecating, and sometimes she’s just too much, but it’s worthwhile to check in now and then. Most recently she wrote about “Ten Things I Used to Think.” She used to think that

brindle colored dogs were ugly, and tortoise shell cats, too, like a coven of hyenas held a secret midnight seance and magicked bits of their coats onto domesticated animals to make them mottled and homely and less likely to be adored than other, more beguiling creatures, but then I realized I was the one busy assigning worth based on appearance which seems to me now to be both silly and reprehensible, and I wonder what else I’ve gotten wrong.

She moved from the more trivial to the much less trivial, for example:

I used to think men were the heads of households by virtue of their genitalia and a poor interpretation of the Bible, and I used to think a woman’s place was in the home due to same. Now I think adults are leaders together, are in charge of and responsible for themselves, ought to use their power over children wisely — by which I mean collaboratively and kindly and relinquishing as much control as possible — and that humans of every stripe belong everywhere, including the workplace *and* the home, because the more types of people we have in All the Places the more likely we are to learn to SEE each other and SEE the beautiful pieces we each bring to this Kaleidoscope World.

What was really interesting was how her readers then chimed in with their own changes:

I used to think immigrants should “get in line” and “do it the right way.” But then I found out there is no line for many people who just want to make a better life for themselves and their families. And then we started making a mockery of the lines that did exist.

I used to believe tolerance was where I should stand, that hating the sin/loving the sinner was possible, that if you just raised your kids right everything would turn out okay. But then . . . I had the privilege of actually becoming friends with people who were gay, . . . When my friend’s son married his husband, I went to the wedding to celebrate God’s provision of love and marriage. It wasn’t “gay marriage” — it’s MARRIAGE.

See what Beth Woolsey did there? She has extended grace to brindle-colored animals, and she has extended grace to herself by **allowing herself to change her mind**. AND NOW she's extended grace to her readers by inviting them to admit to changing their minds about really important moral issues. She didn't condemn or reject the earlier version of herself, but she also claimed the /opportunity/ to do better and be better. That's grace.

The passage from Deuteronomy is part of the law that Moses gives the Hebrew ex-slaves as they build a community from the ground up. This law, the law of Jubilee, extends grace. It says, every seven years all debts are to be forgiven. If your neighbor needs a loan and it's the 6th year, "do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, 'The seventh year, the year of remission, is near' and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing." Even if you knew your loan was likely to have to be forgiven, you still needed to make the loan. And the reason for having a periodic year of jubilee was that borrowers often had to repay their loans with sweat equity—work them off—and it was all too likely to result in a permanent underclass of indentured servants who did not have a realistic prospect of paying off their debts.

Debt forgiveness was not unknown in the Ancient Near East, but it was the province of kings. Kings could release citizens from taxes, military draft, and state labor obligations. They also cancelled debt and released debt slaves. These decrees were common throughout the region, but they depended on the whim (which is to say, the pressing political needs) of the king. What's different here is that the people of YHWH are being challenged to let go of economic advantages that are rightfully theirs, **as an act of community building and neighborliness**. You do not nullify the debt because you feel like it or because the debtor

deserves a break; you forgive the debt even if you don't feel like it because the practice builds a stronger community for all of us; it reflects the heart of God. Grace, extended, is a recognition of the reign of God.

Our celebration of workers, Labor Day, had to be wrestled into existence. It became a federal holiday in 1894 in response to the deaths of a number of workers during the Pullman Strike between labor unions and railroads. Government was pitted against the people in that case as U.S. marshals and military forces caused the deaths of striking workers. Although the church often failed to do itself proud in this regard, the Social Gospel movement of the church affirmed the intersection of faith and social ethics and played a major role in securing justice for working people. American workers won vacations, holidays, workers' comp, days off, health insurance, disability, and collective bargaining through the labor movement.

What those workers did who fought for labor rights was to extend grace to you and me, their descendants. And it wasn't just heavily-muscled, pugnacious longshoremen; it was skinny little girl garment workers too, screwing up all their courage. They acted on one of the things that Beth Woolsey changed her mind about:

I used to believe people when they told me to be quieter and smaller and more "polite" and less crass and more civil and *just sssshhhhhh, Beth; SHUT UP already*. Until I figured out their concern wasn't for me or for the vulnerable and marginalized — and their concern wasn't about ensuring equality and the right of *everyone* to pursue life, liberty, and happiness — but was instead always for the comfort of those in power and aimed at upholding the traditional power paradigms and not rocking the cozy boat for those of us who live with an outsized amount of privilege.

And although Labor Day is a shadow of what it was meant to be, it's still a poignant symbol of the way human beings can create gracious changes that more fully align to the reign of God.

Had it not been for people who showed up and spoke up and rocked the boat, minds would not

have changed about what is due to workers, what is commensurate with human dignity.

We need to be in the business of extending grace and changing minds. We need to carry a vision of a society in which today's debtors and poor are liberated from their burdens for the good of all of us. A just society is not a punishment for those who enjoy privilege; it's what happens when we show up and speak up for human dignity, and demonstrate the more abundant life that is available to those who extend grace as a way of life.

Creator God,
help us to build a new world in the midst of the old.
A world where all workers are valued.
A world where those who clean houses
are also able to buy houses to live in.
A world where those who grow food
can also afford to eat their fill.
A world where those who serve and care for others
are, themselves, also served and cared for.
We pray for the coming of a world where all workers everywhere
share in the abundance that you have given us.
We ask these things
knowing that you give us the courage and strength
to live out our faith in the workplace and the marketplace,
as well as in the sanctuary. Amen.