

Bread and Roses
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“Bread and Roses” Pilgrim Church UCC, April 19, 2015—Third Sunday of Easter

(Luke 24:36b-48)

One of the most important strikes that took place in our country for the rights of workers happened in Lawrence, Massachusetts in 1912. The event was eventually named The Bread and Roses Strike. To be honest, I often have a soft spot for unions and the rights of workers in general. My great grandfather was a union representative for the Rubber Workers Union in Akron, Ohio. So when there was a labor dispute, he was one of the spokesmen for the Rubber Workers. A rebellious streak goes back generations in my family and we're quite proud of that.

Truly, it's hard to even fathom how awful the working conditions have been in many American factories. At the time of The Bread and Roses Strike, a victory had been won by workers when legislation was passed to reduce the work week from 56 to 54 hours. Can you even imagine working in a factory for 54 hours per week? This small, two hour reduction was a victory for those low-wage workers. Employers in the Lawrence Mills reacted to the legislation by slashing wages to compensate for the lost work. The Mill Owners assumed that the workers wouldn't be happy about the pay cuts, but they didn't anticipate organized retaliation.

At the time, many women immigrants were working in the mills, coming from different countries and speaking different languages. The Mill Owners assumed that the workers wouldn't organize with each other because of these cultural differences. How wrong they were! 14,000 workers walked off the job in the first week of The Bread and Roses Strike, followed by 9,000 in the weeks to come. The Industrial Workers of the World helped orchestrate and lead the strike and various Women's Neighborhood Associations helped organize the striking workers and their families too. After a violent confrontation with police assaulting women and children, public opinion overwhelming favored the workers. Eventually the Mill Owners came to terms with those who fought for their rights, and those workers were mostly women immigrants. The name of the strike came from James Oppenheim's poem “Bread and Roses” which declared:

As we come marching, marching, unnumbered women dead.

Go crying through our singing their ancient cry for bread.

Small art and love and beauty their drudging spirits knew.

Yes, it is bread we fight for—but we fight for roses, too.[1]

Movements for change and equality are often about bread on the surface. By that I mean— food, shelter, clothing, education, healthcare, equal rights and protection under the law—basic rights and necessities. But there's often an underlying desire for roses. By that I mean— beauty, art, music, spiritual nourishment, free time and resources to enjoy your life with those you love. Yes, those mostly immigrant women in the Lawrence Mills were fighting for a fair work week in terms of hours and wages. But they were also fighting to enjoy their lives and their families, to truly live on this earth and not just exist. “Yes, it is bread we fight for—but we fight for roses, too.”

Jesus of Nazareth, the Galilean uneducated day laborer that he was, taught and embodied both bread and roses. The necessities of life and those intangibles that give life beauty and meaning. Today's Gospel lesson from Luke is another Resurrection appearance. Now I'd rather not spend time getting too hung up on Jesus' bodily form and ghostly appearance in Luke's Gospel. Suffice it to say that even the Disciples are described as joyful, disbelieving, and still wondering. Might as well just apply that description to us on this Third Sunday of Easter! It really is something that people struggled with understanding the Resurrection from the beginning, long before the Enlightenment made it even harder for people to reconcile mystery and miracle with all we know about how life and death are supposed to work.

The sequence of events in Luke 24 is what's truly fascinating. Jesus stands among his followers saying, "Peace be with you." The Disciples are startled and terrified, thinking they're seeing a ghost. Jesus shows them his wounds and then says something so perfectly normal and human, "Have you anything here to eat?"^[2] He apparently happily munches on some broiled fish. Once he's done eating, he speaks to them on a deeper level and opens their minds to understand the scriptures. The bread comes first, and then the roses. The necessities and then the beautiful intangibles. It's hard to teach and learn on an empty stomach—so Jesus apparently needs some sustenance before delving into how the Disciples will carry on his teachings after he's gone.

The order matters. Bread then roses. Jesus teaches the disciples that his whole life, his teachings, his ministry, his death, and his resurrection showed what God is doing in the world. God is reconciling the world to God's self. Whether we trace it back to the Law of Moses, the fiery and challenging words of the Hebrew prophets, or the complex poetry of the Psalms—God has been hard at work loving us into wholeness. This is why Jesus reminds the Disciples that they are witnesses of these things. They should understand what's happening because they've been right there with Jesus as he's been about his work, modeling what the realm of God looks like here on earth.

Jesus tells them that if you want to carry on my mission, you will declare that people can get right with God if they leave their sins behind, turn back around, and come home to the very heart of God. Transformation is on the horizon, people! Spread the good news starting in Jerusalem. This is a message about roses. This is a message about how we live our lives to the fullest. This is a message about what gives our lives meaning and purpose. We repent—we turn and return to God. We know that our sins are forgiven—we don't have to be separate from God, each other, and our best selves. Not when Jesus showed us another Way.

Jesus literally broke bread with his disciples by eating that fish in our story. And then he planted some roses among them by opening up their minds and their spirits to the transformational work of God in our world. Bread then roses. The order matters.

It makes me think of the movie *Woman in Gold* out in theaters. It's so good because it's a true story. You can't help but be truly affected by what you see—fair warning, bring some tissues if you go! So going with the definition of roses as beauty, art, music, spiritual nourishment, leisure, time and resources to enjoy your life—well, it's a movie about the necessity of roses. "Yes, it is bread we fight for—but we fight for roses, too."

Woman in Gold takes place sixty years after a Jewish woman named Maria Altmann fled Vienna during World War II as the Nazis took over Austria. Maria finally reaches a place in her life, this elderly Jewish widow, that she wants to reclaim a painting of her aunt. Problem being that the Nazis seized that painting from her family and it was put on display in a famous art gallery in Vienna. In time, the painting became known as the *Mona Lisa of Austria*. The Nazis changed the title of Klimt's painting to simply "*Woman in Gold*" to hide the fact that Maria's Aunt, Adele Bloch-Bauer, was Jewish. So not only did the Nazis invade their apartment and

take the painting off the wall of their own home as they did to many Jewish families, they tried to erase the identity of the woman depicted—Adele. When all of Austria looked lovingly and with pride on “The Woman in Gold,” Maria saw a portrait of her Aunt Adele that was stolen from her family as some of them successfully fled the country they once loved.

The movie shows the journey that Maria Altmann and her young, inexperienced lawyer Randy Schoenberg take to right the wrongs of history, ending up at one point in the United States Supreme Court and the heart of the Austrian establishment. Not going to give away the ending, but you see Maria face the complexities of bread and roses. In some ways, Maria couldn't go back to Austria until she felt that she had bread, that the basic necessities of her life were okay. Because when she fled for her life and left Austria behind to come to America, her bread was taken away by the Nazis. The necessities of life—shelter and livelihood—gone in an instant! And then to rub salt in the wound, they took away her family's roses. The art and music and beauty that sustained them as human beings. Bread and roses—gone. Her story is remarkable because she fights tooth and nail for roses to be in her life again (in the form of her Aunt Adele's portrait.)

Maria fights because life is so much more than just the basic necessities necessary for survival, life is so much more than bread. It's like the saying—do you live to work or do you work to live? Work/life balance is not something that comes easily in our community. And though our working conditions are often not as harsh as those immigrant women working in the mills in Lawrence who led The Bread and Roses Strike, it can certainly feel like we spend too much of our time focusing on bread to the neglect of roses. We can turn into bread winners who downplay time with family and friends and just having fun, just being for a while. We have responsibilities and things that we want to accomplish—yet we can get ourselves into so much trouble spiritually and emotionally and physically and mentally if we don't take time to stop and smell the roses.

Because sometimes people have to fight for bread and roses—like those mill workers in Lawrence and Maria Altmann journeying back to Austria. Thinking of bread and roses helps us to consider our priorities and what truly matters in this finite time we have on earth. Jesus reminded the disciples that they are witnesses of these things. New life. Transformation. Forgiveness of sins. Turning and returning to God. Helping people have both bread and roses. As Jesus' Disciples here and now, we are witnesses of these things! “Yes, it is bread we fight for—but we fight for roses, too.” May it be so with us. Amen.

[1] “1912 Bread and Roses Strike,” Massachusetts AFL-CIO, <http://www.massaflicio.org/1912-bread-and-roses-strike>

[2] Luke 24:41.