

Maybe we should all be asking ourselves: What is going wrong in our country? Not just with the current pandemic but with our civic lives. What brought us to this polarized, rancorous political moment? Blacks vs. Whites, Citizens vs. Foreigners, Have's vs. Have Not's. One of the ways these divides happen and fuel the inequality in our societies comes from our way of thinking. That is: if we are successful it is because we made it so. If someone is not successful they are not trying.

It is this divide between winners and losers that has been deepening, and poisoning our families and societies since Adam. It is the attitude that has been subtly passed down from generation to generation. Those who land on top come to believe that their success was their own doing, a measure of their merit, and those who don't, have no one to blame but themselves.

The big word for this is Meritocracy (A system in which advancement is based on ability or achievement <sup>American Heritage Dictionary</sup>).

This way of thinking about success arises from a seemingly attractive principle. If everyone has an equal chance, the winners deserve their winnings, and the losers just aren't good enough. This is the heart of this merit-based ideal.

In practice, of course, it fails completely – Because not everyone has an equal chance to rise to the top. Children born to poor families tend to stay poor when they grow up. Affluent parents are able to pass their advantages on to their kids.

The dark side of Meritocracy is corrosive to the good of a society. It leads to excessive pride and arrogance among the winners, and humiliation and worthlessness among those who don't make the cut. It encourages the successful to inhale too deeply of their success, and forget the good fortune that helped them along the way. Worse yet it leads them to look down on those less fortunate, less credentialed than themselves. This matters in families as well as for societies. One of the most potent sources of uprisings is the sense among many working people that elites look down on them. And very often it is a legitimate complaint.

We find this attitude in the Bible, in our History Books, and in our own communities.

When we tell our children "You can make it if you try" we sow the seeds of Meritocracy, and miss the insult implicit in this advice if they don't

"make it". If you don't go to college, if you don't flourish in the new economy, your failure is your fault. A better advise might be "Give it your Best – and be content with what ever you accomplish".

Is the person who leads a corporation more important than the worker in that corporation? Logically you can't have one with out the other. Should one position be considered more dignified and worth more than the other? Should one live in the lap of luxury and the other have a meager existence? A renewal of the dignity of work and its place at the center of a society is necessary for the elimination of this divide. Work is not only about making a living; it's also about contributing to the common good.

Robert F. Kennedy put it well: Fellowship, community, shared patriotism. These essential values do not come from just buying and consuming goods together. They come from dignified employment, at decent pay. The kind of employment that enables us to say, "I helped to build this country. I am a participant in its great public ventures." This civic sentiment is largely missing from our public life today.

Today's pandemic makes this clear. It reveals how deeply we rely on workers we often overlook. Delivery workers, maintenance workers, grocery store clerks, warehouse workers, truckers, nurse assistants, childcare workers, home health care providers. These are not the best-paid or most honored workers but they should be. But now, we see them as "essential workers". It is time to acknowledge their importance and recognize the importance of their contribution our communities.

For those of us who have risen to a degree of success, it is time to put away the excessive pride and arrogance of a self made person and realize that it was God who gives us our success. And it was not for our aggrandizement – it was so He could show His mercy and grace through our respect and concern for others.

*Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen. 1 Peter 4:9-11 (NIV)*