

Sermon Seeds for Labor Day Sunday, August 31, 2008

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Exodus 3:1-15 -- Learn more and take action at www.pcusa.org/fairfood

The “Sign” of God’s Presence: the People’s Action

When Moses asked God for a sign that he should go to Pharaoh and lead the Israelites out of slavery, God responded, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain." But this sign is only a sign ‘after the fact;’ *after* Moses has gone to Pharaoh; *after* God has delivered the people! In this passage from Exodus we are reminded that God does not provide a guarantee or safe cover. Instead God makes a promise to Moses that the sign he’s looking for will only be “seen” if the people themselves take action in faith. The sign of God-with-us is, ironically, not a sign that God enacts, but one that God’s people enact – “you shall worship God on this mountain.” When God’s people, including Moses, begin to live as if God, not Pharaoh, is sovereign, *then* they will experience the sign of God with them.

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) have reached an historic agreements with Yum! Brands (Taco Bell, Pizza Hut, KFC and others), McDonald’s and Burger King to dramatically improve farmworker wages and address human rights violations in the tomato fields of Florida.

But when the workers began to engage Yum! Brands through the Taco Bell boycott in 2001, many people doubted that the CIW, whose members are among most impoverished workers in America, who spoke little English, had no political clout and few legal rights would be able to change the way the fast-food industry does business. But the CIW was certain that change was not only necessary, it was possible, and they could, despite all the odds, bring it about. Early support for the workers and the campaign for fair food came from people of faith who, with the farmworkers, were ready to work with hope and conviction for that which was not yet seen.

Farmworkers do not need the church to be Moses for them

Moses was at work tending his flocks when he heard God’s voice from the burning bush. He was happily married and far from the struggles of the Egyptian brickyard. But God’s voice broke through his daily routine and demanded that he hear and respond to God who had heard the people’s cries.

When church people hear this story, we often imagine that in situations of injustice, God is calling us from our ordinary lives to do something dramatic – like lead people into freedom. But what if God is calling us from within our everyday lives to consider how the way that we live impacts the lives of others for better or for worse?

The farmworkers do not need us to be Moses for them. What they do need is for us to understand and use the power we have as consumers and the moral power we have as the church in society.

Lucas Benitez, a farmworker and one of the founders of the CIW explains, “It’s very important that we ask consumers for support in the ongoing campaign for fair food because for this issue they have the final word – they can choose to buy or not to buy.” And Gerardo Reyes Chavez of the CIW, reflecting on the important role the PC(USA) has played helping the CIW achieve agreements with the largest fast-food companies in the world wrote, “The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has worked with us, side by side...you supported the campaigns facilitated our process of negotiations with companies; you were with us in our hunger strikes, you supported the truth tours and welcomed us in your congregations; you put the words of the Bible into action. And for us as farmworkers, to see that, it is more than just the church ‘standing with us’ in our struggle—it is about becoming people who are a part of one community, struggling together for the same goals.”

As followers of the God of the Exodus, the One who makes a way where there is no way, the farm workers have invited us to be partners with them in their struggle for dignity and decent wages. As Presbyterians we know that ultimately the one who is “in charge” is the God of the Exodus who makes a way where there is no way. And so we live with the strong hope that our witness will help *all* corporate food buyers and the growers who supply them to understand themselves as responsible partners in the covenant of work and will work with the farmworkers to establish supply chain practices that ensure the human rights of agricultural laborers.

Let My People God: Modern-Day Slavery, Modern-Day Exodus

A new and vicious form of slavery is alive and well in the agricultural fields of Florida: human trafficking. Human Trafficking is the recruitment, harboring, transporting, providing or obtaining by any means any person for forced labor, slavery or servitude in any industry or site such as agriculture, construction, prostitution, manufacturing, begging, domestic service or marriage. According to federal law, a person may not be trafficked within the United States itself or from another country.

The 216th and 218th General Assemblies of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) passed overtures condemning human trafficking and modern-day slavery. Our church is committed to work against these vicious forms of human exploitation and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers is one of our partners.

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers has worked with the U.S. Department of Justice and the FBI to expose and prosecute six cases of slavery in recent years, freeing more than 1,000 slaves. These are not instances of poverty wages, but of forced labor where men and women are forced through violence or threat of violence to work and are unable to leave. The use of the word slavery is neither hyperbolic nor metaphorical language. These cases meet the high standard and definition of slavery under U.S. federal laws. These cases have been prosecuted by the U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division either under laws forbidding peonage and indentured servitude passed just after the Civil War during

Reconstruction (18 U.S.C. Sections 1581-9) or under the 2000 Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act, which was reauthorized in 2003 and 2007.

In January of 2008, a federal grand jury indicted six people under the 13th Amendment for enslaving farmworkers in Immokalee itself. Among other abuses, the workers were beaten, locked in a truck and were unable to leave. This is the seventh case of forced labor to emerge out of the Florida fields in the last decade.

In November 2007, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers received the premiere international anti-slavery award from Anti-Slavery International for their “extraordinary contribution to ending slavery in the U.S. agricultural industry.” Founded in 1839 in England, ASI is the world's oldest international human rights organization. The CIW has previously won the Robert F. Kennedy International Human Rights award (2003) as well as commendations from the FBI and the U.S. Department of Justice for their ground-breaking work.

Because giant retail food corporations (fast-food and grocery) help to create the conditions in which farmworker poverty and modern-day slavery flourish, it is critical to correct these detrimental business practices. Major corporate buyers — companies like Burger King, WalMart, McDonald's and Yum! Brands, whose sheer economic muscle is unprecedented — have increasingly used their buying power to drive down their costs, squeezing their suppliers for the deepest possible discounts on produce. In turn, growers have sought to maintain their margins by squeezing their suppliers, and in particular the one supplier with the least power to negotiate its price and labor.

While growers cannot demand cheaper tractors from John Deere, cheaper chemicals from Monsanto or a break on the interest rate from their bank, they can hold wages stagnant, or even cut the piece rate, and still obtain desperately poor workers to pick their crops. In its 2003 study “Like Machines in the Fields: Workers Without Rights in U.S. Agriculture,” Oxfam America concludes: "Squeezed by the buyers of their produce, growers pass on the costs and risks imposed on them to those on the lowest rung of the supply chain: the farmworkers they employ" (page 36).

By paying a penny-per-pound increase to farmworkers and working with the CIW to establish and enforce rigorous Codes of Conduct, Burger King, Yum! Brands and McDonald's are working to counteract the downward pressure on wages and human rights that their purchasing practices exert. The PC(USA) Campaign for Fair Food joins with the CIW and other institutions and individuals in urging the rest of the fast-food and grocery industry to work with the CIW to adopt similar practices. Currently the PC(USA) is working with the CIW to engage Chipotle Mexican Grill and Subway through letter-writing and peaceful public witness.

In Exodus 3 God announces, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings,⁸ and I have come down to deliver them...” The existence of modern-day slavery is an affront to God's intention for our world and a violation of the covenant God has made with us. Insisting that the food we eat must be produced in ways that respect human beings, the CIW, the PC(USA) and other fair food allies have begun to chart an “exodus” from modern conditions of slavery and exploitation.