

Change of Business

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Last Monday I walked from the church over to the Old Capitol to take part in a political rally. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers had come up from Central Florida to renew their request to meet with Governor Crist to discuss the plight of farmworkers in Florida's vast agriculture industry.

It was high noon on a lovely spring day. The petunias in the well-tended beds in front of the Old Capitol were in full bloom. A fresh breeze was blowing, the sun was bright, and I must admit that I was thinking about the kilowatts our new solar electric generating system was putting "on the grid" at that moment.

The last thing on my mind was slavery, the theme of the rally. As speaker after speaker described to the crowd the conditions under which many farmworkers must labor – the heat, the paltry pay, the backbreaking work, the substandard housing – a troupe of farmworkers presented a wordless play at the foot of the Old Capitol steps.

A cardboard sun mounted on a long pole rose behind a cardboard panel truck. One side of the truck was cut out, so the audience could see two farmworkers asleep inside. Their hands were chained to the wall. Next, a stern-looking crew boss entered the truck, unlocked the chains, and led the workers out. He gave them plastic buckets of the type used to harvest tomatoes, and pointed to some cardboard tomato plants. The workers moved fast, pantomiming the rapid motions needed to keep pace in a real tomato field with real fruit to pick and a real crew boss to answer to.

After a few minutes, the crew boss gathered up the workers, led them to the truck, and wrapped their hands in chains before shutting the door. The cardboard sun set behind the cardboard prison on wheels. A cardboard moon rose to take its place.

This drama was repeated over and over, for about an hour -- a silent commentary on the speeches being made at the microphone. If you weren't listening to the speeches, you might take the skit to be a kind of medieval morality play – with overdrawn characters depicting abstract economic forces at

work in agribusiness -- the uncaring owners, the exploited workers, the difficult conditions which create a *kind of* slavery.

But that was not the reason for the play. The play's purpose was to re-enact an actual case of modern-day slavery which took place in our state not terribly far from where we are worshipping right now. In fact, real people were chained and pistol-whipped, were forced to sleep in airless U-Haul trucks with no toilet facilities, were cheated out of their wages. The case was tried last year in federal court and the slavers sent to prison for 15 years.

But even that is not the whole story. The incident depicted in the play is but one of seven slavery cases that has come to light in recent years. Most of them took place in Florida. It is fair to say that slavery still exists in the Sunshine State, in the shadow of the State Capitol and this, the capital city's oldest church building. This morning I look up at that slave gallery and wonder what the saints who used to sit up there would say about that.

One of the speakers at the rally was Noelle Damico, a minister and the national coordinator of the Presbyterian Church's Campaign for Fair Food. Noelle spoke of the long association our denomination has had with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. Many of us recall the times those sisters and brothers have spent the night in our church and the meals we have shared through the years. One of my most cherished memories of George Meier is of him ladling out chili from a huge pot. We were expecting fifty workers that night. A hundred showed up for supper. That pot was like the widow's cruise. Miraculously, it never ran out.

If you are wondering why Presbyterians are hanging out with farmworkers, you need look no further than today's Gospel lesson. It's John's version of the so-called "cleansing" of the temple in Jerusalem. I'm not sure "cleansing" is the right word. "Disruption" might be better. Or even "unlawful demonstration."

According to John, Jesus entered the great Court of the Gentiles, where he found a kind of sanctified farmer's market taking place. Vendors were selling cattle, sheep, and doves for pilgrims to buy to make their sacrifices to God. The law said that any sacrifice had to be inspected and approved by the priests, so it's safe to assume that these animals were all pre-certified. The cattle and sheep were bought by wealthier worshippers, but the law did provide for the pious poor to offer doves instead. The mark-up on doves was smaller, but no doubt a clever entrepreneur could make up the difference through volume.

Jesus also found money changers there in the temple court, seated at their tables. Every adult male Jew was required to pay the annual temple tax of one-half shekel. The catch was, only official temple shekels could be used for this purpose. The money changers were there to convert Roman denarii into coinage that was officially acceptable to God.

Jesus made himself “a whip of cords,” says John, and with it drove the pack of them out of the temple. The sheep sellers, the cattle callers, the bird barkers, the money changers with their green eye shades and portable calculators – everybody. **“Take these things out of here,”** he orders. **“Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace.”**

John’s version of this story is a good deal more colorful than Mark’s. You can hear the rush to the nearest exit, with a moo-moo there and a baa-baa there, here a moo, there a baa, everywhere a protest, as Jesus enacts a very public “sign” of who he is and the truth that he embodies.

Jesus, John tells us in the prologue to his Gospel, is God’s **“word”** made flesh, living among us, **“full of grace and truth.”** Here in this story is God’s fleshly Word in action. “Get rid of all this *stuff*,” the Word made flesh declares. “You don’t need all this in order to worship my Father in my Father’s house.”

I don’t think Jesus was condemning temple worship per se. He was challenging the notion that faithfulness consists in using the right coins and making the right sacrifice. As he would later tell the Samaritan woman at the well, **“The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth”** (John 4: 23).

John Calvin taught that Jesus fulfilled the roles of “prophet, priest, and king.” Here is Jesus the prophet standing in that long line of Old Testament prophets who called for justice for the poor and fair-dealings in the marketplace, who condemned those who worship God on holy days and exploit the poor the rest of the year.

In John’s Gospel Jesus enacts this “sign” early in his ministry, right after the famous wedding in Cana of Galilee. For John, acts like changing water into wine and disrupting business as usual in the temple are “signs” that point away from themselves toward what God is doing in Jesus Christ.

In Christ God calls us to stop doing business as usual, whether in our houses of worship or in our houses of commerce. In Christ God's truth breaks forth in the temple and also in the marketplace.

Seeing the Word made flesh in action, snapping that and causing all that panic in the temple, it's not hard to imagine the Word made flesh showing up at last Monday's rally. Somehow, however, I can't see Jesus standing politely in the crowd, taking care not to tread on the petunias.

No, the Jesus of this morning's text would have burst through the door of that make-believe panel truck, and would have broken the chains that bound those farmworkers.

Or, just as likely, when the drama opened and the audience saw the workers bound inside, they'd have seen Jesus there as well, his own hands bound in the same chains. It would not be the first time the world has seen the Word made flesh bound and bleeding and being pushed around by authorities who think they're in control.

Those who label themselves "evangelicals" -- true believers in the Word made flesh -- are wont to ask, "What would Jesus do?" I confess, I find myself reluctant to ask that question because I fear the answer.

I fear that Jesus wouldn't stay at the Capitol for long. I fear he'd take make the short walk from the Capitol to First Presbyterian Church to do a bit of house-cleaning amongst us.

He'd want to know what we're eating these days and where it came from. He'd ask uncomfortable questions about our role in a system that keeps food prices low and farmworkers' pay unchanged for the past 30 years. He'd want to know why the workers aren't receiving that one-penny-per-pound raise for the tomatoes they pick -- the raise they fought so hard to get from big buyers like Taco Bell and Burger King. The buyers have agreed to pay the higher price. Why aren't the workers receiving it?

Jesus would want to know, before sending us scrambling for the exits, how you and I could presume to worship the Father in spirit and truth without seeking justice for brothers and sisters who pick the food that finds its way onto our tables.

It's always risky to ask "What would Jesus do?" But it's clear from Scripture what he would *not* do. He would not ignore the bondage of the very people for whom he lived and died and rose. Today he's in the temple making it less a marketplace.

Tomorrow he's in the marketplace making it more a temple – a place where God is honored and God's will is done.

Until our market looks more like a temple, the work Jesus gave us to do has not been accomplished. Thanks be to God that Jesus is alive in the fields, alive in the market, alive at the Capitol, and alive in the church.

To find him is not hard. To follow him requires a change of heart and a change of business.

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