

Partners in Christ's Service

Presbyterian Women's Gathering

Saturday, February 4, 2006

Rev. Susan Rice and Rev. Noelle Damico

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Naples, Florida

Scripture References: Exodus 23: 6-13

Hebrews 13:1-3

Prayer: Gracious God, as we gather this day hearing your word read and preparing to hear your word proclaimed. So, we ask for a new and fresh vision. We are preparing to answer your call and we long to serve you in vibrant and creative ways. Open our hearts and minds that we might both hear and feel the breath of your Spirit moving among us this day. Amen.

Susan:

Before we start the words of inspiration this morning, I need a show of hands. How many of you in this room have been a member of or associated with a Baptist church?

Well, I also attended a Baptist church as a youth and young adult and one of the things I was involved in and was really my first introduction to what I thought was mission work was an organization called Girls in Action or GA'S I still remember its motto: "Go Forward" and also the verses that grounded the existence of this group. Give thanks to the Lord. Worship him. Tell the nations what he has done. Announce how honored he is" (Isaiah 12:4 NIrV). And we had what they called a lifestyle verse: "The Lord has shown you what is good. He has told you what he requires of you. You must treat people fairly. You must love others faithfully. And you must be very careful to live the way your God wants you to" (Micah 6:8 NIrV). And then we even had a pledge we memorized: As a GA, I will do my best to live a missions lifestyle that honors God by learning about missions, praying for missions, giving to missions, doing missions and participating in the work of the church." As I think back on that, I realize that was my first introduction to missions and reaching out to others. It was a good grounding and one that has impacted the way that I choose to live out my faith. However, although we did do a lot of studying about missionaries and what they did and how important their work was, it wasn't until I became a Presbyterian that I heard the words "social justice." Now granted, I could have just not been listening, and the verse, especially the Micah verse certainly reflects social justice, but it has only been recently I have truly come to understand what that means. As we heard read so beautifully this morning our passage from Exodus, we are reminded of our call to social justice. In fact, we are reminded that God's personal involvement in matters relating to any of "his people . . . who are poor (Deut. 15:1-11) is always pointed and intense. If they are oppressed, God will hear their

cry. As a result we are called to do the same. I wonder, Noelle, are we hearing that cry—and what is that cry as it relates to the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and our work with them?

Noelle:

Presbyterians have not only heard the cry of the farmworkers in Immokalee, we have amplified the workers' cry so that people, institutions, and corporations across the country might know the awful truth about exploitation in the fields of Florida. A little history will be helpful. After decades of stagnant sub-poverty wages and exploitation in the fields, after 8 years of marches, work stoppages, hungerstrikes and unfruitful appeals to the Florida legislature, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, decided to hold Taco Bell, one of the fast food companies that was purchasing high-volume, cheap tomatoes from Immokalee, accountable for the suffering its business practices produced at the bottom of its supply chain.

In 2001 the workers called for a boycott of Taco Bell restaurants and products until the company agreed to work with the CIW to address wages and working conditions of farmworkers picking tomatoes for their suppliers. In June 2002 the 214th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) voted to support the boycott and became a crucial partner of the CIW.

Presbyterians across the country wrote letters, prayed, fasted, protested, and provided hospitality or material support to the farmworkers as they sought to establish socially responsible purchasing by Taco Bell. The PC(USA) also encouraged other national religious bodies to join the workers in the boycott. As a result of these efforts and the efforts of students across the country who “booted the Bell” off their campuses, on March 8th, 2005, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) and Taco Bell Corporation reached an historic agreement that concretely addresses the sub-poverty wages and working conditions of farmworkers and is the first step toward moving the fast food industry toward a new way of doing business that respects human rights. Upon reaching this agreement, the farmworkers called for an end to the Taco Bell boycott.

What I want to emphasize is that in this struggle to change conditions in the fields, it was the farmworkers themselves who led the way. They had both the analysis and the plan which had grown out of many years of experience in the fields. The church was a part of that plan as a moral voice in society as well as as a body that had many, many customers of Taco Bell who cared that the food they purchased be produced fairly. But the church was not the savior. The church was not the hero. While the farmworkers may have been like the slaves in Egypt, the farmworkers did not need us to be Moses for them. They need us to be partners with them.

Susan:

Also, Noelle, I think it's amazing that as one reads through Exodus we are reminded of the connection between holiness and social justice. Israel is called to be a holy people, but the point is made earlier in Exodus that the issue is NOT how Israel can *become* a holy people, but how it can *be* in daily life the holy people it has already become by God's action on their behalf. It's as if the pattern for a life of holiness has been provided by God and that includes a life lived on behalf of others. Israel has been set apart by God, not to live apart from the world, but to live a life of service within the world. To serve God is to serve the world. Part of the motivation for this is that the people of Israel, too, were once aliens in a strange land and were delivered. Israel was the disadvantaged one in Egypt, enslaved in an alien land. So when the people of God mistreat the poor, the oppressed, the enslaved, they violate their own history. How does this play itself out in our life together with our sisters and brothers in Immokalee, Noelle?

Noelle

When scripture reminds us that "once you were slaves in Egypt", it is the invitation to remember that God's people were called and shaped from the midst of extreme oppression. Too often the church forgets that our birthplace was among the immigrant family of Sarah and Abraham, among the Hebrew slaves in Egypt and among the early followers of Jesus resisting the Roman Empire with the gospel message that Jesus, not Cesar, is Lord.

And this invitation to remember is also an invitation to inquire: why are people enslaved? And who benefits from their slavery? What are the social and economic structures of our day that depend on slavery and exploitation?

Today in Florida farmworkers are experiencing not only exploitative wages – earning 40-45 cents for every 32 pound bucket of tomatoes they pick but also modern-day slavery. Slavery is only the most extreme form of the sweatshop conditions that exist throughout Florida's agricultural industry – where workers toil from dawn to dusk for sub-poverty wages at a piece rate that hasn't changed significantly in nearly 30 years, with no right to overtime pay, no health insurance, no sick leave, no paid vacation or pension, and no right to organize if they would hope to improve these conditions.

Now when I say slavery I don't mean "slave-like" conditions. I mean very specifically that there are people picking in the fields who are trafficked, sold by the head for \$2000, and forced to work-off their debt in the fields. Actual slavery, where workers are held against their will, forced to work at gun point or through threats of violence. The CIW has worked with the US Department of Justice and the FBI to free more than 1,000 slaves and prosecute five cases of slavery in recent years. There are more cases currently under investigation.

Since the fast food and grocery industries both demand and profit from the exploitation of workers in the form of low-cost tomatoes, they have the responsibility and power to actually change the situation in the fields. Together farmworkers and consumers are

working to demand that retail food companies take responsibility for conditions in their own supply chains.

Oppression comes far too often from “business as usual.” It is not the fault of one particular person, but the product of larger systems that function in such a way as to consistently coerce some for the profit of others. These larger economic systems co-opt us all -- farmworker and customer alike. Once we were strangers in Egypt – feels odd to us, we don’t believe it because we’ve been insulated by systems that isolate us from one another, that keep us ignorant of how our behaviors affect others. We purchase without thinking about where our products come from, who made them, and under what conditions they were made. So at the end of the day the question is whether we will work together to change these edifices or whether we will get amnesia as we eat our fast food and live our comfortable lives and forget that once we were slaves in Egypt.

Instead the farmworkers have reminded the us, that just like in Egypt, injustice and oppression often involve systems that neither an individual, nor a small group of people acting alone can rectify. It requires collective, partnership action. And together with God we’ve been taking the first real steps into a new, more just world. , real steps into a new, more just world.

Susan:

I think we forget sometimes that Israel’s history is our history and Israel’s call is our call. However, if we listen to the Hebrews passage, the call is the same, is it not? Are we not continuously called to emulate the life of Christ and to live as God’s holy people? I am particularly drawn to the words “mutual love” in this passage. It puts a whole new slant on how we are to treat others—with “mutual love” and showing hospitality. Wouldn’t you think that when we are called to show “mutual love” that means an equal sharing, a partnership—not an “us is doing for them” attitude, but one of friendship, brotherhood and sisterhood—one of truly equal partnership. How might we reflect that aspect in our work with the Coalition or with others in Immokalee as well? Are we already answering God’s call and how might we improve?

Noelle:

Mutuality is different than compassion – which is about helping someone in need. For mutuality breaks us out of the model of helper/helpee, out of patterns of inequality where one party is the giver and the other is the receiver. A relationship of mutuality builds the dignity and equality of both partners.

Of course the farmworkers need us to continue to support the campaign for fair food as it embraces the entire fast food industry. But do the farmworkers also need our help in funding their new community center? Absolutely But the most important thing to remember is that in giving to the community center, which has offices for private interviews with escaped slaves, a radio station for educational and cultural programming

in Spanish and indigenous languages, and meeting space that can accommodate the 200 farmworkers who show up for meetings each Wednesday – by helping to fund this center we are NOT giving to make farmworkers a little more comfortable in their poverty and oppression. We're helping the farmworkers abolish slavery and exploitation.

And the farmworkers have given great gifts of faith and courage to us. They have reminded our church that we will grow and thrive when we stand on God's covenant which calls us to build a more just society.

I'd actually like to let you hear, from a member of CIW, how the church has shown mutual love and built a true partnership of dignity and equality with the farmworkers. Upon the successful agreement between CIW and Taco Bell, Gerardo Reyes Chavez wrote an open letter to the Presbyterian Church and said,

Throughout this struggle, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has worked with us, side by side. You supported the boycott, facilitated our process of negotiations with Yum Brands; 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.

Key leaders of the church showed a deep understanding of how to work with us by taking off the "suit" of their position in the church institution, and coming as people to share with us and to learn from us and to teach us about you too! And then they put back on the "suit" to make justice. It's about being humble people and using the power of the institution to send a strong message.

We are setting an example for people all over the country in terms of how we are partners in this struggle. We can change many things in the fast-food industry today by standing the line together—no matter how overwhelming changing the situation seems or how much we have to sacrifice to make it happen. And we know we are going to succeed. Through the boycott we have been dreaming together, and with God's help our dreams are becoming possible.

Susan: As we move forward from this service, how can we continue, together with the CIW, as partners in Christ's service?

Noelle:

While the Taco Bell boycott is over, the campaign for fair food continues as together with the farmworkers we reach out to McDonalds and ask them to work with the CIW to institute socially responsible purchasing practices within its own supply chain. I encourage all of you to learn more about the history of the boycott, the nature of this

ground-breaking agreement, and the next steps for creating industry wide change, beginning with McDonald's, by reading the bulletin insert and by visiting www.pcusa.org/fairfood .

The story of the Taco Bell boycott, the human rights victory that ensued, the current campaign to engage McDonalds and the human rights victories that we know will come, is a story of how the Church and farmworkers became, and are becoming, people who are, as Gerardo said, "part of ONE community, struggling together for the same goals." And so we give thanks to God for bringing us this far and step boldly into God's future together as *hermanas y hermanos en la fe*, as sisters and brothers in faith. Amen.