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Field Education Reflection #2
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Exodus 1:8–14 (NIV):

Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt.⁹ “Look,” he said to his people, “the Israelites have become far too numerous for us.¹⁰ Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country.”¹¹ So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh.¹² But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so, the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites¹³ and worked them ruthlessly.¹⁴ They made their lives bitter with harsh labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their harsh labor the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly.”

In this scriptural passage, we witness the beginning of Moses’s story: a narrative set in a place where Moses’s people—the Hebrews—were ostracized and hated for their ethnicity. In fact, the Pharaoh of Moses’s time is intentionally disparaging to immigrants. He is fearful of them. The Torah says the Hebrews grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them. They are now numbered into the hundreds of thousands. But the Pharaoh hates that the Hebrews are increasing in his country, so he decides to enslave and humiliate them. He tells his people, “Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase...set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor” (Exodus 1:10). And so, the Egyptians became ruthless in their punishment of the Hebrews, making their lives bitter with hard service: service that no *Egyptian* would ever do; service that was beneath the Egyptians; service in field labor. This was because the pharaoh, the ruling political voice, acted out of fear: a fear that sparked horrendous xenophobia, oppression, and exploitation of the Hebrew people.

Unfortunately, we do not have to strain too hard to imagine these circumstances. We see this exploitation going on in our own country, in our own modern times, in our own backyards.

We see this xenophobia in the current political news coverage, continuously scrolling on the bottoms of our televisions, and popping up on our computer screens. The United States of today resembles the oppressive system in Exodus. While we pride ourselves as being the world's superpower, our capitalist system commodifies and exploits other weaker markets and our *own* labor force: exploiting the very identities of black and brown people. Our leading political candidates make inflammatory remarks demeaning immigrant individuals and families, forgetting that this country exemplifies a melting pot of diversity. In fact, some of the oldest native residents are people of *brown skin* who spoke *different languages: not English*. How quickly power and privilege corrupt! How quickly these inhuman words and actions gather strength and make groups of people act in ways that cause genocide and holocaust, slavery and human cruelty. How quickly we are to point our finger at "the other," without imagining ourselves, at some point, as "the other."

This summer, I have had the privilege to travel to migrant worker camps and interview farm laborers in the fields of North Carolina. As these men, women, and children discuss their everyday realities—enhanced by the fear of deportation and the xenophobia of this current administration—I'm astounded by the wherewithal and steadfast faith the workers exhibit. I ask, "Where do you see God in your life?" While the answers vary amongst the workers, the fundamental core of their responses describe a God that has not forsaken them or left them. The workers speak of a God that sees them in their suffering, and yet the workers steadfastly believe that this God will lead them out of bondage.

This intersection of faith and oppression is discussed at length in Walter Brueggemann's book *Disruptive Grace*, where Brueggemann explicitly examines Exodus's pharaonic system. Not only does Brueggemann describe Pharaoh as exploitative and self-indulgent—a common

interpretation—but he extends this description to the entire empire, comparing the ancient society to modernity. Brueggemann’s analysis of Exodus 12:12 exemplifies this point:

For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both of human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord. (NRSV)

Brueggemann claims that YHWH intends to...defeat the divine power that makes it possible to regard dehumanization as a legitimate arrangement of social power.”¹ By exhibiting an alternative, imaginative reading of the text, Brueggemann offers fresh insight into the Exodus story, elucidating YHWH as a God that treasures and upholds social justice for all of creation. Therefore, the first commandment in the Mosaic covenant is to be interpreted not only about monotheism, but about a dismissal of commodification and exploitation.

What’s more, Jesus shows us in the gospel accounts that, to exorcise demons—such as racism and xenophobia—one must first notice them and then call them by name (Luke 8:30). Jesus had the ability to look at demons directly and address them. After acknowledgment, Jesus can banish this evil from its inhabitants. Yet, what’s also important to note: this evil did not just go away forever. It always seems to insidiously re-surface. Therefore, one must be persistent in extracting and demolishing the evil amongst us—everyday. Only when we acknowledge the persistent and consistent enabling of a broken and unjust system, will we be able to become more Christ-like. Teresa of Avila once said: “Christ has no body but yours, No hands, no feet on earth but yours, yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world, yours are the feet with which he walks to do good, yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.” May these words serve as a reminder that God is amongst us, even closer than we may realize, and also with our “neighbors.”

¹ Walter Brueggemann and Carolyn J. Sharp. *Disruptive Grace: Reflections on God, Scripture, and the Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011).

Prayer:

I pray that the same Lord of the Hebrews, the same YHWH of the Jews, and the same God of the farm workers enables me and all believers to “stay woke” to all the injustice in this world, and strengthens us to unceasingly fight against it.