

Emmanuel Mennonite Church
Gainesville FL
8 Sept. 2019 – 13th Sunday after Pentecost
Samuel B. Trickey

From Property to Person

Lessons (Rev. Common Lect. Year C)

Psalm 139:1-6 & 13-18; Jer. 18:1-11; Philemon.1-21; Luke.14:25-33

Sometimes self-centered ideas about the lectionary overtake me. From time to time I am called upon to preach in churches, as I am honored to do today. In preparation I go to the lectionary and, more often than not – or so it seems – the lessons appointed are not easy ones upon which to preach for me. Thus it was when I first read today’s lessons. It is not that the passages are unfamiliar. It is that they are hard. My first-reading reaction was “what did the lectionary developers see in common amongst these 4?” After reading and re-reading as well as reading commentaries, it makes more sense. The remarks and interpretations that follow are, in a way, a report on my struggles with taking that hardness seriously.

For the Luke passage it is fairly easy to get trapped into literalist reading. Jesus uses hyperbolic language to force the crowd’s attention onto the issue of ultimate priorities. It is a call to drastic priority setting in context of the family centrality of the time; the only social safety net was family, the government was hostile and tyrannical. Jesus seems deliberately to discourage half-hearted or hesitant potential followers. The Matthew 10:37 version, ““Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” makes the point explicitly as priorities. In Luke, rejecting (“hating”) the narrowness and exclusivity of family fits with the broadening of compassion and empathy and responsibility in the Good Samaritan story of Luke 10:30-37.

Thus hyperbole is not empty theatrics but a plain statement – faith in Jesus has consequences. It is not a business of wearing a cross as a piece of jewelry but carrying a cross of commitment, engagement – and sometimes therefore of inconvenience, unpleasantness, annoyance, or even outright harm. Again note the connection with Good Samaritan – The Samaritan took a serious risk with brigands – in other words, he “hated” his own life and didn’t let personal safety get in the way - to help a Jewish stranger, who could be expected to hate the Samaritan. That’s two risks at once to enact mercy to an injured stranger. So to “hate your life” in the modern world may be better understood as to disdain self-indulgence and deprecate self-importance. No, contrary to advertisement, you don’t owe yourself a luxury car or a premium vacation, or Michelin 3-star meals, or a new boat or whatever. What you owe, what I owe, is priority for and with the ones who are hurting. Help bind their wounds, help stop the wounding. . Not necessarily easy nor pleasant nor gratifying – but there it is.

Another hard injunction is to “Give up all your possessions”. Certainly this is a clear condemnation of the “prosperity gospel” heresy that is alive in the US and elsewhere today. We

should say so, but not be complacent in our correctness. Closer to home and more relevant to our situation is the distinction between “possession” and “gift”. Notice repeatedly in the Gospels the distinction between stewards and owners.

The Luke passage also a clear-eyed call to practicality – Jesus gives two examples of careful, unflinching estimates of costs before undertaking an endeavor. Contrary to libertarian solipsism about the “sovereign individual”, what is to be sovereign in human life is relationship – practical, clear-eyed relationship. We are all in this together, irrespective of wealth, race, education, gender, nationality, patriotism or any other qualifier. There is a sovereign uniformness of obligation. Again, not necessarily easy nor pleasant nor gratifying – but there it is.

Go back to inconvenience, burden, harm – and think for a moment on Paul’s letter to Philemon. It is composed from prison. Paul is imprisoned for an act of civil disobedience: preaching Christ. That in itself is worth reflection by us – would we be willing to be imprisoned? Frankly, in 50+ years of social justice and civil rights effort I’ve never been arrested nor detained and don’t want to be. Many colleagues and friends are bolder – and have paid serious prices, even here in Gainesville. Anyway, Paul is matter of fact about his imprisonment and the letter plunges on. Philemon apparently is a church father who is well-to-do enough that an early Christian congregation met to worship in his house. Paul wants to make sure that his appeal is to the congregation leadership, so he also addresses an influential woman by name, another leader by name, and then the whole body. The barrier issue, the social hurdle, is lost property.

Except, the lost property is a human being, a runaway slave named Onesimus. Slaves then, as with the most dismal part of our own country’s history, were disposable instruments. From the legal perspective of owners, slaves were not real people. A runaway such as Onesimus therefore could be killed by Philemon. Yet Paul is sending him back. And he uses all of his rhetorical skill and theological depth to urge a drastic change in relationship between Onesimus and Philemon. He says to Philemon and the church as a whole, take this so-called property back as a person, a brother, take this property back in the role of Paul’s son! And now I begin to see a bit of what the Lectionary designers were about. This is a drastic, sweeping expansion of the notion of family. Paul is asking Philemon to obliterate the traditional boundaries of family and restore Onesimus to humanity from his former oblivion as property. He is asking Philemon to give up the role of “owner” and take on the role of fellow Christian. And as a sort of premium, if Onesimus has any left-over debts, Paul will cover them. All of this Paul does with utter respect for Philemon’s dignity. Philemon is asked to receive Onesimus as a full-fledged person, not commanded to do it on the basis of Paul’s apostolic authority.

These reflections on personal exegetic struggles are not just an exercise of underused theological muscles. One way to pose the issue for today is to ask this: who is being treated as property? Part of the answer goes back as far back as Nov. 25, 1960. In the almost legendary CBS broadcast *Harvest of Shame*, there is an infamous quote from a south Florida grower: “we used to own our slaves, now we just rent them.

For almost 50 years it has been my honor and privilege to work with farm worker organizations as part of National Farm Worker Ministry. That happened because my first father-in-law and mother-in-law worked with Migrant Ministry before it became NFWM. By now I have heard some all too familiar themes repeatedly. Doesn't matter where we go. Whether it is from Familias Unidas Por La Justicia diagonally across the country in Washington State, or United Farm Workers in California and Arizona, or Farm Labor Organizing Committee in Ohio and North Carolina or Comite de Apoyo a Los Trabajadores Agricolas in New Jersey, or Coalition of Immokalee Workers or Farm Worker Assoc. of Florida what we hear is this: people are being demeaned as property. And workers are pushing back – somos personas, no tractores = we are persons, not tractors.

To make matters worse – the so-called property is not taken care of very well. Some of the abuse is so commonplace we almost don't hear it: poor wages, tough working conditions, uncertain hours, substandard housing. But there is another category of abuse that increasingly has come to be voiced: sexual abuse, mostly of women farm workers. Sexual favors become the price of being picked for a crew at shape up or of getting a ride to WalMart in town or a not-as-bad room in a labor camp. Sexual violence – a crew member saying I can have my way with you because I have the power and we are invisible – is common. You may have seen pictures of women farm workers in south Florida or the central valley of California or near Yuma Arizona and wondered, why do workers in such hot places have long-sleeved shirts, hats pulled down and a bandanas covering all of their face except for the eyes? The answer is this: to appear as non-descript and a-sexual as possible.

In Nov. 2017, as the extent of sexual abuse in the film and TV industry was becoming a topic of daily news, the Alianza Nacional de Campesinas wrote a “letter to Hollywood”. Among the remarkable quotes was this: “We wish that we could say we're shocked to learn that this is such a pervasive problem in your industry [That is, film and TV]. Sadly, we're not surprised because it's a reality we know far too well. Countless farmworker women across our country suffer in silence because of the widespread sexual harassment and assault that they face at work.”

Farm workers, especially women, must fend for themselves in the face of retribution. There is a long, very ugly history of calling in immigration authorities to quell farm worker protests and organizing. We appear to have it seen it a month ago. The ICE raids on Morton Mississippi poultry plants on August 7 involved a Koch Foods Inc. plant. In 2018 Koch had paid \$3.75 million to settle a law suit involving racial discrimination and sexual harassment at that same plant. Notice – sexual harassment.

The modern farm worker struggle has been long – it has spanned my adult life. There has been some progress. Much remains to be done. It is important not to get discouraged but to be tenacious. That brings us back to Farm Worker Ministry and Harvest of Justice. We are promoting, right now, a 6 week period of study, prayer and diverse action. We can talk about it after worship and watch the video at lunch.

Harvest of Justice and the need not to be discouraged brings us back to the lectionary too. The Jeremiah passage appointed for today is about the potter who dislikes something about how the pot on the wheel is emerging. So she picks it up, makes it into a formless lump and starts anew to make a good pot. The text then describes the fate of a nation in the Lord's hands as being akin to the lump of clay in the potter's hands. Harsh language. Not a nice, warm, vaguely "spiritual" text. Yet it is reassuring. It tells us that God is in charge, even when we see a malformed pot in the making. The issue is whether the nation turns from evil. Remember, "nation" at that time meant "society + culture + religion". There was not concept of church and state. Our task in this moment is to turn our nation – including our culture and society - from evil.

One evil is to treat farm workers as non-persons, but as rent-a-slaves. That evil allows farm worker women to be sexual commodities, not people. And such evil goes on, along with the sadly commonplace evils of poverty wages, wretched housing and so forth, because farm workers are nearly invisible to urban America. It's the not-so-funny adult version of the child's theory that chocolate milk comes from near-black cows. I was translating for a group of National Farm Worker Ministry Board members in a labor camp in North Carolina in 2016. One of the workers caused us to suck in our breaths when he said "I did not know that people like you cared about people like us."

By supporting the Blue Card legislation, the Fairness for Farm Workers Act, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers' Wendy's boycott, the Farm Labor Organizing Committee struggle with British American Tobacco, by reminding StarBucks about United Farm Workers' struggle with Darigold, by doing these things and saying your prayers for farm workers, you are moving in the direction of treating farm workers like people, not abusable property. That is how St. Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon. We must do no less!

Amen