

“Moses was a Basket Case”

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Exodus 3:1-15; Romans 12:9-21

Labor Day Sunday, August 31, 2008

First I need to change the sermon title. I came up with the first one via a church readerboard in Portland, which said, “If you think you’re going crazy, remember Moses started out as a basket case!” What a great reminder to lighten up when things get hard. But in the interest of time I had to take most of Moses’ story out and the new title is something like “How the Reformation redefines work.” Not so catchy!

Last Wednesday, I took time off from my job in Everett to take a few school supplies to a family who is living in Camp 3 off the Cook Road. They have one room, a front door and a window. When you step inside, the counter with sink and a hotplate are on the right and a table is on the left. Across the back are two built-in bunk beds. Very sturdy and used for sleeping, play space and as couches. I was offered a chair...the only chair.

Now I am not completely ignorant of this way of life. I picked strawberries as a child alongside migrant families. Later, I worked in community action in Hillsboro, Oregon and about one-third of the poor people we organized were migrant families who lived in labor camps. It was then, in the early 1970s, that I actually shook hands with Cesar Chavez and saw him speak to farm workers in Woodburn. But even with a pretty good sense of what goes on; sitting in their “living room,” and visiting with the 13 year old son and 9 year old daughter (who translated for their mom), I was stunned to realize what a different part of the world I was in. So close, yet quite far away.

While his mom worked on hand stitching a waist band onto a skirt, the boy told me how he was picking blackberries now, but that he wasn’t a very good picker. And he explained to me that they were home at lunchtime, because it was a bad day to work. There was just too much rain. He said that payday was Friday, and they’d pick up a check for \$300. He asked if I thought that was very much money to make in a week? I didn’t tell him that I’d just spent \$60 on bargain school supplies that the school district website listed for him and his sister to take on the first day.

When we talked about which day school actually starts, I was happy to see that they had a calendar on the wall for us to refer to. It allowed us to share a concept of time that seemed critical if these children were really going to start school on the first day. I know it’s a small thing, but having a calendar seemed like the best tangible example of the connection we had between their current life and mine.

I think we really cannot do too much for the families who come to the fields and pick the crops. I know that for farmers to keep planting and not selling off their fields, they need to have willing workers, as well as people who will pay the cost for fair food.

On this Labor Day Sunday, what is interesting is how this family’s work, and our thinking about them, is embedded in a history of the work ethic that ties directly to the Bible and our reformation theologians, Martin Luther and John Calvin. It turns out that there is reason for why it is called the Protestant Work Ethic and not the Roman work ethic, the Hebrew work ethic, or even the Catholic work ethic.

Here is a greatly abbreviated version from Dr. Roger B. Hill who offers an on-line course on the History of the Work Ethic through the University of Georgia, College of Education.

He starts with Traditional Judeo-Christian story that man was placed in the Garden of Eden "to work it and take care of it" (NIV, 1973, Genesis 2:15). This ideal work situation was disrupted when sin entered the world and humans were ejected from the Garden. Thus work became regarded as a curse.

A view shared by the Greeks, (Maywood, 1982) whose word for work was *ponos*, meaning sorrow. The Romans had only two occupations suitable for a free man--agriculture and big business (Maywood, 1982). And these were pursued to achieve an "honorable retirement into rural peace as a country gentleman" (Tilgher, 1930, p. 8). Other work was considered vulgar, dishonoring, and beneath the dignity of a Roman citizen.

Early Christians looked forward to the second coming of Christ and the end of the world. Any attachment to physical things of the world was frowned on. As time passed and the world did not end, work was redirected at organizing the Church.

In medieval time, a hierarchy of professions and trades was developed by St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) as part of his writing on all things human and divine (Tilgher, 1930). Agriculture was first, followed by the handicrafts and then commerce. However, the work of the church was in a higher category (Rose, 1985). At this time people were called to their work by God, but it was the duty of a worker to remain in his class, passing on family work from father to son.

Work still had no intrinsic value. Its function was to meet the physical needs of one's family and community, and to avoid idleness which would lead to sin (Tilgher, 1930).

Martin Luther, who lived from 1483-1546, affirmed manual labor because he regarded all vocations as equal callings. He objected to the monastic life which he considered egotistic, and he accused monks of evading their duty to their neighbors (Tilgher, 1930). Also, Luther disapproved of commerce because he felt that it did not involve any real work. And he believed that each person should earn an income to meet basic needs, and to accumulate or horde wealth was sinful.

It was John Calvin, who lived from 1509 to 1564, who expanded on the ideas of Martin Luther and formed what has become known today as the Protestant work ethic. Calvin taught that all men must work, even the rich, because to work was the will of God. It was the duty of men to serve as God's instruments here on earth, to reshape the world as the Kingdom of God and to become part of the continuing process of creation (Braude, 1975). He enlarged the concept of what kinds of work God would call us to do, when he said that we were not to lust after wealth, possessions, or easy living, but were to earn all we could and reinvest the profits of our labor into financing further ventures. This way we could demonstrate that we were likely to be among the Elect. (Lipset, 1990).

When history moved forward to the capitalist and industrial eras, the motivation of persons to work hard and to reinvest profits in new business ventures was perceived as an outcome primarily of Calvinism, and the Protestant work ethic was defined. (the preceding is verbatim or adapted from: <http://www.coe.uga.edu/workethic/hatcp.html>)

This brings us to the tomatoes on the communion table, Paul's job description for Christians and our work as Presbyterians in PCUSA today.

We live in a time when the piling up of wealth by a few is remarkable. The ones who accumulate wealth will tell us that they are investing in the economy and the spigot is open so all can have their share of the wealth. But you and I know that part of the investment has to be made in the lives of the people who are doing the work for the lowest pay in the most basic jobs. They can't wait until the run-off gets to their field. They are being left high and dry.

I went to the PCUSA website and got an overview and update of the Campaign for Fair Food. In 2001, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers began to engage Yum! Brands about their low wages for picking tomatoes and began a boycott of Taco Bell. They had been paid the same wage for 20 years. CIW members were among most impoverished workers in America, they spoke little English, had no political clout and few legal rights and it was unlikely that would be able to change the way the fast-food industry does business. But against all the odds and with the early support from a Presbyterian youth group in southern Florida, PCUSA and people of faith, they succeeded.

When we hear stories of injustice, we imagine that God is calling us from our ordinary lives to do something dramatic –for us to be like Moses to lead people into freedom.

But what if God is calling us from within our everyday lives to consider how the way that we live from day to day, impacts the lives of others for better or for worse?

The farm workers did not need us to be Moses for them. What they needed then and continue to need now, 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 farm worker 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 of the PC(USA) in 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 farm workers, 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." (www.pcusa.org)

As part of the PCUSA we can participate in the The Campaign for Fair Food. It is an ongoing effort of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), in partnership with farm workers from the CIW, to advance.... fair wages and other human rights of tomato pickers and other farm workers.

As people who came after the Reformation, it is easy for us to see our work is a reflection of God's presence in our lives. We can also see how we consume and how the social, political and economic systems need to be revised. We can live the vision of Apostle Paul, to love, be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹(To) not lag in zeal, to be ardent in spirit and serve the Lord. ¹⁶(To) live in harmony with one another; (to) not be haughty, but associate with the lowly and (to) not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

God told Moses that the sign that God was with Moses and the Israelites was one that became evident by what the people did: "...you shall worship God on this mountain."

When the people of God, including Moses, began to live as if God, not Pharaoh, was sovereign, then they experienced the sign of God with them. And it's what we do and how we live from day to day that gives us the sign that we have answered God's call and that God is with us.

Let us pray:

God of all things and parent of carpenter Jesus, we thank you for work. For in our work, you call us to give you honor, serve others and create a loving community. We thank you for the many immigrants who come to work in our land. May we serve them as they serve us. God of justice, you call us to treat the laborers in the vineyard fairly. Your prophets decry the oppression of workers. Your people traveled forty years to escape oppressive work in slavery.

When we establish just and living wages, When we create safe and healthy working conditions, When we provide harassment-free working places, We are setting free the oppressed. We are creating justice. We are doing God's work. Bless us all, living God, help us to be and raise up workers of clear minds who are glad to labor in your name and strive together to build your Beloved Community. Amen.

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3 Hymns for Labor Day: Awake, My Soul, and with the Sun, PH, page 456, As Those of Old Their Firstfruits Brought, PH, page 414, I'm Gonna Live So God Can Use Me, PH, page 369

Lectionary scriptures for August 31, 2008

Exodus 3:1-15 - ¹Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ²There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. ³Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." ⁴When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." ⁵Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." ⁶He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

⁷Then the LORD said, "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, ⁸and I have come down to

deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." ¹¹But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" ¹²He said, "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."

¹³But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" ¹⁴God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" ¹⁵God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations."

Romans 12:9-21 - ⁹Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." ²⁰No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.