

1 Sermon, June 17, 2012

Texts: Job 5:1-16

Title: "Stories of Faith – Combating Human Trafficking"

This Father's Day, I'm going to be telling about some things that good fathers dread. I'll be talking about "human trafficking," a modern kind of slavery through a complicated web of economics and violence.

When you hear the phrase "human trafficking," you may think of human trafficking as primarily girls kidnapped for the sex trade. And that is a significant part of it, but only about ten percent of the human trafficking in the world is related to the sex trade.

Human trafficking is the second largest criminal industry in the world after drug trade.

Take the case of Vijay in southern India. Vijay and his family were slaves. For seven years, Vijay and his wife were forced to work seven days a week, thirteen hours a day along with other slaves. The work was exhausting; those men, women and children who were physically able were required to wade through rice paddy, picking the grain, drying it under the hot sun, then boiling it to refine it into rice that could be packaged and sold - generating enormous profits for their owner.

Vijay and others were forced into this slavery through one-time cash advances. The loans were a trap. The forced laborers were paid far below minimum wage and they were not allowed to work anywhere else to help pay back the loan. In fact, they were rarely allowed to leave the facility even to purchase necessities like food or medicine from the main market in the village.

Although Vijay had initially taken a loan of only 2000 rupees (about £25) - and they had certainly already paid it off many times over through their labor - the owner claimed the couple owed him 18 times the original amount borrowed.

Two of their children lived with their grandmother in another village. The couple gave birth to a child in the abusive rice mill. When the baby became sick, Vijay asked the owner for permission to take his one-year-old daughter to the hospital. The owner refused. For a month, Vijay begged. Finally, the owner allowed him to visit a local village doctor. But it was too late. Two days later, Divya passed away. The parents were devastated - and the owner robbed them even of the dignity of burying their daughter in their own village, forcing them instead to work the very day she died and on into the night.

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The rice mill owner beat the slaves in his rice mill and threatened them with violence, forcing them to perform the exhausting work without breaks.

There is good news at the end of the story, however, the International Justice Mission prosecuted the rice mill owner and Vijay, his wife and four other families were set free – with some rehabilitation funds provided by the government of India. But IJM had started building a case that would prove the rice mill owner was running his rice mill through forced labour slavery - criminal under Indian law. Local authorities and police accompanied IJM into the rice mill in May 2011 and rescued Vijay and his wife, plus four other families trapped inside.

At our recent United Methodist annual conference, we passed a resolution asking each congregation in the conference to learn about human trafficking and its effects, and work against it.

Why should we care?

First of all, there it is a moral outrage. We, who as a church have worked against child labor for more than 100 years, should be concerned that 250,000 children live and work in Pakistani brick kilns in complete social isolation.

1.4 million children have been forced to work in Uzbek cotton fields. There are fewer children in the entire New York City public school system.

Second, you and I are involved. That smart phone, that T-shirt, computer, cup of coffee – that stuff often comes from slaves.

The chocolate in that candy bar could come from slaves. In the Ivory Coast, which supplies about 35% of the world's cocoa, there are an estimated 200,000 children working the fields, about 12,000 of these as virtual slaves held in check by violence.

You know those little sparklies in make-up?. Every day tens of thousands of Indian children mine mica for those sparklies.

Even reputable brands just don't know where all the materials come from: the cotton in the T-shirt, the tantalum in the smart phone, the beans in the coffee.

Where there is a market, and the rule of law is weak, the result is often human trafficking.

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If you're interested and have access to a computer, you can estimate approximately how many slaves have pitched in to make the goods you enjoy on a daily basis, at slaveryfootprint.org.

In this country, people from abroad are recruited to serve as laborers, domestic servants, farm laborers, hotel workers, prostitutes, and are then held in virtual slavery with threats, violence, withholding of documents and needing interpreters to communicate. An estimated 17,500 persons are trafficked into the US every year.

The third reason to be concerned with human trafficking is that the majority of *cross-border* trafficking *is* for the purpose of the sex trade. According to the U.S. State Department, 600,000 to 800,000 people are trafficked across international borders worldwide every year. 50% of these people are children and 80% are female, and the majority are trafficked for sexual exploitation.

As a father, I shudder to think of the grief and shame to discover that your daughter's former boyfriend introduced her to a guy who sold her into the sex trade.

But it happens over and over.

Kelsey Emily Collins was one such young woman.

As Kelsey entered her teen years she became involved with alcohol and drugs and often ran away to parties, totaling her mother's car one night and later stealing a friend's car. The juvenile justice system's answer to Kelsey's behavior was to place her in juvenile detention whenever she skipped school, ran away from home or failed a drug test.

When Kelsey was arrested for prostitution, her mother was shocked. It didn't occur to her that Kelsey might have been coerced and forced into prostitution. Kelsey told her mother that her bruises and black eyes came from fights at school.

The legal system was not so helpful. They didn't let Kelsey's mother know about counseling options for Kelsey, and treated Kelsey as a criminal.

Kelsey had started prostituting herself after a former boyfriend convinced her it would be a good way to make money. When she was taken into police custody in Portland, Kelsey told the police that her new pimp was a 36-year-old man she had just met who would drive her between Seattle and Portland. She made \$1,500 her first day in Portland, she told police.

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Kelsey became a business commodity for pimps who threatened her with violence. The safer decision for Kelsey was to sell her body to strangers than to defy her traffickers.

After a time, police and prosecutors were able to convince Kelsey to testify against her traffickers. She did so in April 2009, and before her traffickers were convicted, Kelsey disappeared. She went to meet her boyfriend, but never got there. She packed no bag, and authorities believe it unlikely she is still alive. She was 18 at the time.

This is close to home for United Methodist Women. Kelsey's grandmother, Gloria Jessup, is a United Methodist Woman in Dearborn Heights, Mich.

The United Methodist Women website has links to organizations that work to combat trafficking.

The scripture tells us to respond:

Isaiah 42 gives us a call to action:

But this is a people robbed and plundered, all of them are trapped in holes and hidden in prisons; they have become a prey with no one to rescue, a spoil with no one to say, "Restore!" Who among you will give heed to this, who will attend and listen for the time to come?—Isaiah 42:22-23 (NRSV)

Psalms 82 gives us a moral mandate:

Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.—Psalm 82:3-4 (NRSV)

So, what can we do?

We can support free trade products. There are many organizations like SERRV that sell goods guaranteed by independent observers to be produced by people who receive a fair wage.

My wife, Marianne, just purchased some jewelry as gifts from a woman here in Columbus who works with a for-profit free trade group modeled on the pampered chef or Tupperware type of marketing. This particular company sells only goods produced by those who have escaped from trafficking.

There is legislation that has had broad bipartisan support promoting laws against trafficking. You can help promote these laws.

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There are non-profit groups dedicated to the abolition of modern-day slavery through legal intervention. You can donate.

There are organizations promoting a different kind of prosecution for prostitution. Instead of seeing the prostitutes as criminals, they see them as victims, and urge governments to go after the pimps and patrons instead.

You can also support the Harkin-Engel Protocol, which was an agreement between the US congress and chocolate manufacturers to independently certify chocolate as slave-free.

It was supposed to have eliminated slavery in the chocolate industry by 2005, but then was extended to 2008 and then to 2010. Data has been collected on about half the cocoa-producing areas, but independent verification has been poor.

The chocolate makers were to create programs in West Africa to make Africans aware of the consequences of child labor, child trafficking, and keeping their children from an education. The incentive for the companies would be the "slave free" label so consumers would feel guiltless when they had their chocolate. But the economic and political forces at work make it hard to complete and enforce the protocol.

In the case of human trafficking, it is not too difficult to answer the question, "what would Jesus do."

The question is: "what will we do?"