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## There must be a Social Dimension to the Gospel

A sermon given by  
Rev. Josh Longbottom  
On Sunday, January 25, 2009

These times are troubled across this great nation and I have come to you today to ask for your compassion on a people that are far, far away. With wars raging in Afghanistan, Iraq, Gaza as well as economic crises at home, it's hard for me to ask you to pay attention to the wages of tomato workers in Florida. Especially when I know now that a number of us are without jobs, others who, after retiring, are being forced to reenter the work force, and undoubtedly countless other hardships are being endured that I have not caught wind of. So I hope it does not appear crass for me to say to you that we are called to reach out to others who are in need, and when we do God comes into our lives anew and our own hardship is made a little lighter.

Two weeks ago I went to Immokalee, Florida, which is in the southwest part of the state, half an hour east of Naples, to be immersed in poverty, to observe the working conditions of current day migrants on the eastern border of America, who begin harvesting tomatoes in the winter and other vegetables and citrus in Florida, and then migrate north as the weather warms. When I went to visit Immokalee, I went with a group led by Shannon Gorres, a member of our congregation, who was facilitating this alternative winter break on behalf of ECM, the Ecumenical Christian Ministries we support at KU.

We went to meet the coalition that organizes on behalf of the workers and also to meet with a group of Yale Divinity students who, like us, were responding to the call from their larger denomination body to investigate the situation and to support the coalition in whatever ways possible. Personally, I wanted to find out if the stories that I was hearing were true.

When you drive into the town of Immokalee, the level of poverty is not immediately obvious. It's not a tent city; it's not a shanty-town. People are living in trailer homes, ten to fifteen per unit, mattress pad next to mattress pad, paying rent the equivalent to downtown real estate prices in Manhattan, trudging home after 10 to 15 hours of work like a pack of zombies.

Because of pressures from the market squeezing crew leaders, some have chosen recently to use forced labor in order to make money for themselves. One day when I was there we were taken on a tour of labor camps that had been documented as places of slavery. Most notable is the story that I heard about Miguel Flores and Sebastian Gomez who were sentenced to 15 years in federal prison on counts of slavery, extortion, illegal use of firearms, and neither paying nor allowing their more than 400 workers to leave.

Our group had gone down in the hopes of being able to get work so that we could join the workers in the fields and observe the circumstances. Those plans, however, did

not work as we had intended. We tried to get hired for the day, but we looked like a peck of salt on a piece of rye. And one crew leader remarked to me that gringos don't get to pick tomatoes. Being the only white people around, the crew leaders were rightly suspicious that we were there to observe the working conditions, and they intelligently refused to let us join them.

Now, machines can pick fruits from trees, but they damage the trees. And tomato-harvesting tractors can get tomatoes for sauce and for ketchup, but when it comes to getting produce pretty enough to sell in the supermarket or to put on a hamburger they have to be picked by hand. And from my experience it is clear that it is picked by brown hands. Gringos don't pick tomatoes; gringos go to college.

Some of the people who were picking tomatoes there were second and third-generation immigrants, some of them the first. Some of them were there legally, and yet some of them were there illegally. But I don't believe it's an immigration issue. It's an issue of human rights, and America has a long history of being an equal-opportunity exploiter in the agricultural industry.

To sum up my experience, it is clear that the wages were terrible, and that abuses filled the atmosphere with fear. Which leads us to the question, what are we to do here in Lawrence, Kansas, surrounded by a million other issues as well? Well, I am proud to say that the churches, and especially the United Church of Christ, has played a vital role already in furthering rights for these workers through education, through encouraging systematic boycotts, through giving proxy ballots to coalition members so they can speak at shareholder meetings, through providing one of few avenues where executives can hear stories directly from workers. And I am proud of the work we have done in Lawrence, Kansas, marching two to three times a year on behalf of fair food reform.

But the question still remains about what, exactly, is our responsibility. We have slavery popping up on the east coast. Most of the clothes we wear come from sweatshops. We have toxins spilling over and out of the Midwest. War, famine, AIDS, economic crisis, you add your favorite one to the list. I wish I had some formula that could explain how you could respond to all these issues simultaneously. I wish I had a way to tell you that if you did X, Y, and Z you could be sure that you were a good person and a part of all the changes that need to take place. I've looked for that formula for most of my 20's and it was like grabbing for the wind.

Dr. King would tell you that injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere, but that is a tall task indeed. I simply can't find the time, the energy, or the brainpower to even conceive of how to respond to all these issues simultaneously. So call it sophomoric, if you will, but in times like these I turn to my faith and the stories that I know from the Bible to help sort out my calling. Today's scripture passage was particularly useful for me in the week that I spent in Immokalee. Jesus turns to Simon and Andrew and says, "Come, follow me." And then Jesus turns to James and his brother John and says, "Come, follow me."

Now, let me say this. You can find a mystical experience of God on a hilltop communing with nature. I have. You can find God in the church, singing together. I have. You can find God in your family, coming back home from a holiday. I have.

Those are all real experiences of God, holy and true. But to find the God that Jesus is pointing to will put you in the trenches.

There are three things about today's story that strike my attention and help me reflect on my experience in Immokalee. The first is the lesson of courage, spontaneity and flexibility exhibited by Simon and Andrew, James and John. Those three things are marks of how the Spirit will behave in all of our lives, forcing us to be courageous, forcing us to act with spontaneity, and forcing us to continue to shake off the scales and be flexible.

The second part of the passage that strikes me is that these two jokers, James and John, jumped out of the boat and left Daddy with the work and skipped off into the sunset down the beach with the big JC. (Not unlike what I did, heading for Florida and leaving Peter with all of you.) This biblical story does not show a systematic way that we can respond to sort out what our callings are. It shows an impulsive response. That's what people mean by following Spirit, trying to explain the unexplainable. And to respond means leaving something unattended.

The final thing that struck me about this passage is that if Simon and Andrew, James and John do not go, they will never know. Plain and simple. From my survey of all the biblical stories and histories, I have come to believe that our God is in the trenches fighting for the rights of all people. And by learning to see with the right set of eyes, when we reach out and help we can see God all around. I saw God in Immokalee. I saw God in the parents who were working for a better life for their children. I saw God in the children playing, unaware of the struggles that surrounded them. I saw God in the workers who rose to challenge corporate giants. I saw God in a coalition that didn't just fight for the rights of the people, but hosted festivals for their joy. I saw God calling Yale Divinity students to come and see. I saw God calling ECM students to come and see. I saw God in me, willing to plunge into the unknown. And I saw God in all of you, a congregation that would send me.

Responsibility doesn't seem like the right word to me—the responsibility to act. Instead I hold up to you this promise that I have found in the gospel: If you reach out in faith to those in need, the hand that you grab will not just be a person, but God also. And all those other things won't matter as much.

Honestly, helping out is not as hard as it seems at the outset. When I first went to go protest on behalf of the Immokalee workers, I went dressed up as a giant tomato, donning a guitar and playing the song, "Pay More Money for Me." It really cost me nothing. There wasn't a better thing I could have done on that Saturday afternoon and I could have brought the kids, if I'd had them.

I didn't even know much about the issue back then. I just knew that my church was behind it and that nine times out of ten I agree with protest. The God part came in when, a year later, I found out what it meant to these families in Immokalee who could not comprehend that we would march for them a thousand miles away in solidarity. I don't say this to be like, "look at me, I'm the good guy." I've done twice as much as half of you and half as much as the other. I know where I stand. I'm not God's best disciple, just the most rock 'n roll. I'm not saying this to inflate my own balloon. I just want you to know that it feels good.

All I'm trying to say is that I honestly believe that when you reach out, something will reach back. Amen.