

Human Trafficking

Feb. 2, 2014

Scriptures: Ex. 21:2-11, Rom. 8:15-17

1. Introduction

My Christian Peacemaker team-mates and I went to church in Suleimaniya in Iraqi Kurdistan as usual. This was always an awkward time. The Kurdish language was foreign to us. The Chaldean Catholic liturgy was just as foreign. Congregants were an oppressed minority in Iraq and suspicious of outsiders like us. The church had been built by eastern Kurdistan's corrupt tribal leader Jalal Talabani to curry favour with them, but that just added to the suspicion. Our attempts to meet with the priest were rebuffed repeatedly.

On this particular Sunday we noticed four other foreigners in the back rows – two men and two women. They kept looking at us nervously. On our way out of the service, one whispered quickly to us that he was a prisoner in Kurdistan and could we help him escape. Then he disappeared. Two Sundays later we saw them again and heard a few more hurried words of their story. Over the next weeks we learned that they were victims of human trafficking. They had been lured from the Philippines by promises of good jobs in Turkey. On their arrival in Suleimaniya, in Iraqi Kurdistan, their passports were seized by their labour contractor and they were told that they could not leave. The women were assigned as domestics to well-to-do but abusive Kurdish households. The men were assigned to a factory making doors and they were housed in an over-crowded, unheated bunkhouse. Their masters only allowed them out for these brief weekly church services. They were essentially enslaved.

We in Christian Peacemaker Teams had no experience with this. But we felt the urgent need to help them escape. Somehow. Eventually with the expertise and assistance of an inter-governmental group called the International Organization for Migration we were able to help these people leave their so-called employers for a safe house, then obtain travel documents, and eventually return home. A rescue story with a happy ending. One of the few. And it started in church.

Now our church has a similar opportunity to assist people in similar circumstances. The visioning team that you heard from last night at our AGM urges us to create a safe space in our building for victims of human-trafficking. This modern-day slavery is apparently widespread. Even in Ontario. We here are only beginning to learn the extent of it. So we will spend this month of February learning more about human-trafficking through our sermons, beginning with this one, and in after-church Soup & Sophia discussions.

2. Slavery in the Bible

Slavery is not a new phenomenon. It is repugnant and yet seems to have been a part of human history since the earliest recorded times at least 5,000 years ago. And it runs through the Bible in many ways. Someone enslaved is by definition said to be owned by another person to be used or sold as that person wishes. In the Hebrew scriptures we read that prisoners of war were often enslaved, both Hebrews and others. Enslaved persons could also be bought from others. For example, Midianite traders bought young Joseph from his brothers and then sold him to the Egyptian official Potiphar. Debtors who went bankrupt were often forced to sell their children or even themselves to others and thereby became enslaved.

In Biblical Israel, enslaved persons seem to have had a few more rights than was common in ancient Near East slavery. But they were still enslaved. Hebrew law put some limits on slavery, perhaps to avoid a national drift into widespread slavery under the repeated economic pressures of drought and war in a vulnerable, subsistence economy. The Mosaic law said that enslaved Hebrew men and their wives had to be freed after six years. And their former slavers had to give them sufficient resources to make a fresh start (Ex. 21:2-6, Dt. 15:12-18). This was not the case for a Hebrew girl who had been enslaved. She was forced to marry her slaver or his son or become his concubine. Failing this, she could be redeemed by a relative (Ex. 21:7-11). Unlike enslaved Hebrews, foreigners could be enslaved permanently in Israel and handed on with family property. However they did share in Jewish religious festivals like Passover (Ex. 12:44) and Sabbath rest (Ex. 20:10). And Israel was warned to not treat them harshly. Moses warned repeatedly, "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt" (Lv. 25:43, 53, 55; Dt. 15:15).

In New Testament Palestine, it seems that only a small proportion of the population was enslaved. The Greek word used was "doulos" which can mean slave or bond-servant or a free servant. Most of these douloi served as domestics in rich homes and might be entrusted with significant responsibilities. Jesus used many examples of this practice in his parables, such as the parable of the talents where three enslaved persons were given much responsibility for their master's gold, but were also held accountable for how they generated profits from it for him. Jesus often described his relationship with his disciples as that of a master and his servants. Such servants might be enslaved persons or, indentured, or free, but they were all subject to their master. Jesus turned the disciples' understanding of servitude and slavery upside-down by serving them, as he did in washing their feet, thereby encouraging them to mutual service to each other. Jesus told them, "whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant [or slave], and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave" (Mt. 20:26-27).

Things got even more mixed up when whole households, including enslaved domestics, were converted and began to follow Jesus' ways. Now the slavers and the enslaved were brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul repeatedly pointed this familial relationship out to the now-Christian slavers (1 Cor. 7:22, Eph. 6:5-8, Col. 4:1). So he appealed to Onesimus to free Philemon from slavery. Paul said in Gal. 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

He says there is no longer slave nor free. Yet the New Testament says that we are all enslaved - enslaved to sin. But because of Christ's servitude unto death, we are now free. Free to become enslaved to Christ instead (Mt. 10:24, Jn. 8:32-36, 13:16, Rom. 6:15-19, 1 Cor. 7:21ff). But this is a very different kind of enslavement. Jesus says that if we follow his commands, to love one another, he no longer calls us slaves but friends (Jn. 15:15). Paul expands on this saying, that we are not only slaves of Christ, not only friends of Christ, but we are also children of God, adopted into God's family, and so heirs with Christ to the Kingdom of God (Rom. 8:15-17, Gal. 4:5-7). And so being enslaved to Christ is in fact perfect spiritual freedom.

3. Human Trafficking Today

But human traffickers today are not dealing with such spiritual matters. The Walk Free Foundation estimates that there are up to 30 million persons enslaved in the world today. Our government says that perhaps 6,000 of these are present in Canada, especially in Ontario and Alberta. 80% of these are women and children, mostly people of colour. Slavery for the purpose of sexual exploitation, that is forced prostitution, has been the largest proportion of this scourge. But those enslaved in agricultural or other labour may now be comparable in numbers. In Biblical times, drought, war and poverty drove people into slavery. The same is true today. Economic disparities are growing within nations and across borders. Even the Conservative John Major, Margaret Thatcher's successor as Prime Minister of the UK, has recently described this growing inequality as shocking and shameful. A recent report by Oxfam says that the richest 85 people in the world own as much wealth as the poorest 3.5 billion people, half the world's population. And most people live in countries where income inequality is growing. That includes Canada, as the middle class shrinks and more people are pushed into minimum-wage jobs or no job. On our continent, the North American Free Trade Agreement has driven 10 million Mexican farmers off their land due to cheap, subsidized agricultural imports from Canada and the U.S. These severe economic pressures have driven many to risk their lives in the perilous journey to the U.S. across the Sonora Desert and into the arms of slavers who exploit them economically and/or sexually while holding over them a constant threat of arrest and deportation. Closer to home in Canada, aboriginal children have been taken captive and adopted out to other families or abused in residential schools.

The Mennonite Central Committee webpage on human trafficking has a link to a site called slaveryfootprint.org which helps you calculate how many enslaved people work for you. When I did the survey I found that I have enslaved 37 people through my purchases of clothing, food, electronics, and gold jewellery which are not Fair Trade. How many people have you enslaved? Go to the website and take their survey – slaveryfootprint.org. Then we need to work together to free those we have so enslaved.

Those who cross international borders in a desperate search for economic security are particularly vulnerable. Not only are they likely alone, in a foreign culture, after a long and expensive journey, they may not have a secure immigration status, making them even more unlikely to complain to local authorities about their abuse and exploitation.

It is interesting to note how many people in the Bible faced similar challenges as border-crossers in desperate economic times. Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob, Leah and Rachel, Naomi and her sons, all sought help in other lands in a time of drought and famine. God's people were enslaved in Egypt for 400 years before being freed to return home. Later almost everyone in the northern kingdom of Israel was taken captive to Assyria and may never have returned, becoming the ten lost tribes of Israel. Later still several thousand leaders of the southern kingdom of Judah were taken captive to Babylon and held for 70 years. So the Hebrew scriptures emphasize God's call to care for strangers and sojourners. Jesus echoed that care in the opening of his public ministry when he said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release of the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Lk. 4:18-19). We at TUMC have joined in that mission many times over the years in our support for refugees from around the globe. Now the Visioning Committee is urging us to also learn more about and then support those caught up in human trafficking in Canada. Particularly women, because they are the most vulnerable. And particularly those who have been brought here from other countries.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, hear the words of the prophet Jeremiah: “Administer justice in the morning, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed...woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbours work for nothing, and does not give them their wages” (Jer. 21:12, 22:13).

In a global economy, all workers are our neighbours, and we benefit from their labour. Whether they are in a sweatshop in Toronto or in Bangladesh. In a field in Colombia or California or Niagara. Are they working for nothing? Have we given them the wages due? Are they free or are they oppressed and captive? And are we blind or are we seeing?

Mennonite Church USA made a Statement on Human Trafficking in 2009. They said, “We believe that God has created human beings in the divine image. God formed them from the dust of the earth and gave them a special dignity among all the works of creation...When we care for people who are oppressed and stop violence against them, we show that we are people of God...All violence is fundamentally incompatible with the reign of Jesus Christ in God’s kingdom of love. Therefore, as followers of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, we must directly confront the reality of violence in and around us...God is actively creating a world in which all can thrive. All will be able to ‘sit under their own vine and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid.’ No one will labor in vain, or bear children for calamity. All will receive God’s blessing (Mi. 4:4, Is. 65:23)...God invites us to join this creative work and follow Jesus in carrying out his mission: to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom to those who are oppressed.”

And may it be so! Amen.