

Isn't this the Carpenter's Son?

Homily for the Memorial of St. Joseph the Worker, May 1 2014

Genesis 1:26-2:3; Colossians 3:14-15, 17, 23-24; Matthew 13:54-58

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"Isn't this the carpenter's son?" After Jesus teaches in his own home town, these are the words of disbelief spoken by those who should have known him the best: his own townsfolk. "Isn't this the carpenter's son?" It's a pejorative phrase spoken more out of doubt than out of any real faith about Jesus. Might I also suggest that this simple phrase from St. Matthew's Gospel is a sure and certain reminder that our age is not the first that misunderstand the nature of work and the very dignity of human labor.

Ours is a world that tends to commodify life. We tend to place more on what we buy than the person who made it. Indeed, in our globalized economy who know who's made the products we buy. We want nice soccer shoes. But we don't want to know about the child labor from Pakistan used to produce those shoes. We like a nice blouse or sweater. But we don't want to know about exploited cotton workers in Africa. We like to play on our X-box, but we don't want to know about the child labor used in China to produce those games.

Sadly, what's true around the world is also true here in the Yakima Valley. When any one of us tells our friends around the country or around the world that we are from the state of Washington, immediately they think about Boeing, Microsoft or Starbucks. But the truth of the matter is that agriculture is still the largest sector of our economy here in the state of Washington. We are the largest producer of apples in the world. We are the largest producer of pears in the world. We produce more hops here in the Yakima Valley than any other place in the world except the valley in Germany between Regensburg and Augsburg. Indeed, we export hops to Germany for their famous German beer.

But we often forget the fact that undocumented labor is the main support for the large agricultural sector of the Washington State economy. Washington State is home to more than 230,000 undocumented workers and it is these workers – not their products – that must be the first focus of our care and our concern. As the late St. John Paul the Second noted in his encyclical "Laborem Exercens," human work is not about making more – but being more. The goal of work is not simply the production of things for us to buy. No. The real goal of work is the enhancing of our humanity, the uplifting of our dignity, and thus becoming co-workers with God. Such collaboration is embedded in the Eucharist tonight when we offer to God the bread and the wine as: "Gifts of the earth and work of human hands."

This is why – in 1955 – that Pope Pius XII added May 1st to the Church's calendar to honor St. Joseph the Worker. Why is St. Joseph the Worker so important to the Catholic faith? St. Joseph the Worker is important because in his life we see the outlines of social justice.

Allow me to expand on this one key point. In justice – human justice – when St. Joseph learned that his future wife, the Blessed Virgin Mary, was to give birth to a child that he did not physically or biologically father, he could have ended his courtship. He had the civil right under the law. Quietly divorcing her would have been a just and legal action.

Yet St. Joseph does a better thing. He listens to the angel sent to him from God. He follows – not the human justice he is due – but the divine justice that God want to share in Jesus. St. Joseph starts – not with his personal rights – but with the right relationships God wants to bring into the world through his son Jesus Christ. In this very profound labor and work of St. Joseph we see a new plan for a real and lasting social justice.

How different from the way we think. When we think about social justice we tend to think about "my rights." In justice, what am I due? Am I receiving a just wage? Are my civil rights being violated? Is the immigration law just

towards me? These are all very important questions. But – and this is key – through St. Joseph the Worker, God reminds us that justice does not begin with me. It begins with God.

Let me illustrate this in a rather direct way. Many years ago, my grandfather was the union organizer for the Baker and Confectionery Workers Union Local 48 here in Central Washington. He organized nearly every commercial bakery in the Diocese of Yakima. If you shop at a Safeway or Albertsons and have ever bought a loaf of bread, it's union-made because my grandfather personally went to all the bakeries here in Yakima, slowly organizing the workers. As a young boy I often went with him.

It was in that context that he – along with many other union leaders – met Cesar Chavez when the first organizing efforts began here in Central Washington. But here's an interesting fact – and I mean no disrespect to the memory and legacy of the great leader Cesar Chavez – but when Cesar Chavez first began organizing, he did not support the undocumented workers. He considered the undocumented from Mexico to be a threat to the Chicano and Hispanic peoples already living and working legally here in the United States. Cesar Chavez was so against the undocumented workers that he placed vigilantes at the border to prevent Mexicans from crossing illegally. Like many union leaders, he was afraid that the undocumented would drive wages down.

So what happened? Cesar Chavez underwent a conversion. Rather than start with an understanding of justice that included only “his own” workers who were already U.S. citizens, he began to see that justice does not begin with “my” rights but with the rights of the “other.” He became one of the greatest champions for the rights of the undocumented and – at the same time – one of the most devoted followers of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Friends, if we want social justice for our selves, we begin by advocating justice for others. That justice begins with the most vulnerable in our midst: the unborn and the dying. Why? Because if there is no right to life for them then the cards of our society are stacked against all those who stand in the shadow of society: the aged and the elderly, the unemployed and the sick, the undocumented and the refugee, those lacking food, clothing and shelter.

My message tonight is quite simple: Lift your voices on behalf of the undocumented – and at the same time – remember that every civil right is built upon the God-given dignity of the human person from womb to tomb – from the first moment of conception to the final point of natural death. Remember that following the example of St. Joseph the Worker, the first act of social justice begins with marriage between one man and one woman doing all they can to raise and protect their children. Do not be afraid to bring your Catholic understanding of social justice into the public square and do not allow other political or civic groups to pressure you into abandoning your deepest convictions about human life and the dignity of the human person. Do not allow yourselves to be dismissed as a mere “carpenter's son.”

I realize what I have just raised is a rather steep demand. But this is why we are here at Eucharist. We place ourselves alongside the bread and wine so that we – like the bread and wine – might become more converted and transformed into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ feeding and nourishing the human dignity of all around us. That conversion can be slow and painful – but like Cesar Chavez – when our hearts are open we may arrive at a deeper truth about the dignity of every human person – wherever they are on the journey of life.

The very word “Eucharist” means “Thanksgiving” in Greek. So I close with the Eucharistic words: “Thank You.” Thank you for your great desire to see justice for the undocumented in our midst. Thank you for advocating on behalf of a just, comprehensive and lasting immigration reform. Thank you for considering how your rich Catholic faith can season the surrounding political and cultural life of the Yakima Valley. Peace be with you.