Third Sunday of Easter: Human Trafficking

Recognizing Jesus on the Road to Emmaus

Acts 2:14,22-33; 1Peter 1:17-21; Luke 24:13-35

I mentioned in my video introduction to the right that in some ways this is a simple story… a walk with friends, a conversation, a chance encounter with a stranger…but then, something strange happens. "Their eyes are opened" – and they see things they never saw before. Either they were prevented from seeing, or they were not observant, or they didn't care. The scripture scholar Culpepper notes other Scriptural incidents of blindness, including Lazarus at the gate, whom the rich man did not see.

Video URL

This story is a counterpoint to the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (16:19-31). In that parable, Lazarus lay outside the rich man's gate, but the rich man neither acknowledged him nor shared his bread. In death, their situations were reversed, and the rich man begged God to send Lazarus with a drop of water. The irony was that, by failing to help Lazarus, the rich man deprived himself of blessings (Culpepper, 482). By contrast, the Emmaus disciples show hospitality to Jesus, and are rewarded with a private audience with the risen Lord. We never know what blessings we might receive by giving hospitality or what blessings we might lose by foregoing it.

The important point here is that there are a lot of things we don't see, or at least we don't think we see them. Sometimes they are right in front of us. Other times they are truly hidden, and we don't bother to look.

One issue that many people don't see is the problem of human trafficking. We don't see it, first of all, because we have a lot of misconceptions about it. We think it is mostly about young women (it isn't); we think that it is about sex trade (it isn't all about that – there are people trafficked in the restaurant industry, hotel industry, factories, even housekeepers and those who care for the elderly); we also might think the only people who are trafficked are those who are brought in from other countries…again, a misperception.

You can see these misconceptions plus lots more on the Polaris Project website.

Citizens of our own country, especially those who are vulnerable and disadvantaged (poor, young, drug dependent youth, for example) are

routinely lured into virtual slavery. It is kind of the demonic equivalent of the two travelers in our Gospel who nearly have to "force" (*parabiazo*) Jesus to stay with them. But in the case of trafficking, it is not a friendly, hospitable force, but rather an exploitative one.

Scripture scholar Sarah Henrich says, "This is a strange little story in its own right. The two travelers have to nearly force Jesus to stay with them. The verb (*parabiazo*) is used only one other time in the New Testament. Luke uses it in Acts 16:15 where Lydia has to practically force Paul and Timothy to stay at her house. The verb means to "twist someone's arm," to "compel."

Another ironic difference between the Emmaus story and trafficking, is both involve travel… the disciples, joined by Jesus, in salvific travel; and the victims of trafficking, who are "travelled" from one place to another, used, forced to work, to earn money for those who "own" them. Their travel is hardly salvific. It is the antithesis of the Gospel.

Whenever we encounter Jesus, we have to be led toward greater freedom, for that is the reason Jesus came, to be "ransomed from our futile conduct," as the 1st letter of Peter says.

I think the best approach to a homily for today would be to contrast the disciples' journey, and their blindness, with the enforced journey taken by victims of trafficking.

You could use the example of an employee of a meat-packing plant, held hostage because of his immigration status; or of an assistant to an elderly but well-off couple, who has become so dependent on them, that she can't leave, because she needs the money for her children; or the dishwasher in a restaurant kitchen who is trapped because he has no documentation and can't speak English.

How do we bring that saving journey to Emmaus to them?

More resources:

- From the U.S. Bishops
- Some long quotes from the Catechism, previous popes, and Vatican II
- A great resources page from the Diocese of Hartford