

Let My People Go . . . *

BY THELMA BURGONIO-WATSON



Celso Junior/Agência Estado/AE (Agencia Estado via AP Images)

Exploitation of people who are powerless continues from Joseph's time to present day. The Brazilian Census Bureau reported in 2006 that child labor had increased 10 percent nationally; in Alagoinhas, Bahia, children work in coal pits, enduring long hours and dangerous working conditions.

It can be argued that the Bible's core story is the story of the exodus—God reaching out with a mighty hand to redeem and liberate God's particular people from oppression in Egypt. Even the messages in the Gospels largely depend on understanding the paradigms in the exodus story for us to begin to appreciate what God has wrought in Jesus Christ.

The story of the exodus recounts the Israelites' slavery in Egypt, their escape into the wilderness and their entry into the promised land. The events of this particular drama are set in motion by one act of human trafficking—Joseph being sold by his brothers.

Joseph, Bought and Sold

At its heart, Joseph's story is one of tragedy, an exposé of how we human beings exploit one another. Resentful

of Joseph's standing in their father's eyes and of Joseph's dream that predicts them bowing to him, the brothers decide they can no longer tolerate the pesky upstart. Realizing there is no profit in killing Joseph, they sell him into slavery, to a caravan on its way to the marketplaces of Egypt. Once in Egypt, Joseph is put on the auction block, and he is bought and sold as a bill of goods.

The story temporarily turns for the better, as Joseph rises to a position of great authority and relative freedom within the household that purchased him (*Gen. 39:2–6*). But the reality of Joseph's fettered status reemerges when the mistress of the household tries to initiate sex with him. He resists, deeming it a sin against God and a violation of his master's trust. Angered, the mistress claims Joseph propositioned her,

The same radical equality and freedom we are called to model within the church must be in place outside of the church's walls.

and Joseph ends up in prison (*Gen.* 39:7–20).

The underlying lesson in Joseph's story is that no matter how well things seem to be going, the baseline reality for Joseph is that he belongs to someone else—someone who can shower benefits on him or dispose of him on a whim. Even after Joseph becomes Pharaoh's second-in-command over all Egypt, we implicitly understand that Pharaoh has the power to cast Joseph back into the pit where he was found.

At the end of *Genesis*, Joseph condemns his brothers' actions toward him. "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good" (*50:20a*). We should not read into that statement that the evil perpetrated on Joseph is excused, or that the evil of human trafficking is acceptable because God's will becomes apparent. Human trafficking is roundly rejected. The wonder that lies in the text is that God could redeem anything out of such dehumanizing treatment. Nevertheless, by the time *Exodus* begins its tale, the paradigm of Joseph's life as a victim of human trafficking is now writ large and its consequences overlie all Hebrews living in Egypt. And it needs an act of God to end it.

No Longer Slave or Free

In the New Testament, Paul makes a radical statement about the social structure inherited from Joseph's time. "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or

free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (*Gal.* 3:28). To be sure, context for his words is important. Until the advent of Christ, Paul argues, the "law" functioned as a disciplinarian on wayward humanity. But, he claims, through Christ, humanity has matured to the point that we now know how to behave as responsible adults before God and each other.

Paul suggests that the distinctions the "law" made between classes of people are largely irrelevant, and that the "law's" function as a brute disciplinarian is no longer needed. We are emancipated. Further, in the radical freedom that Christ offers, distinctions between in and out, privileged and outcast are dissolved of force and meaning. All are incorporated into Christ without partiality.

One could argue that this is all merely a theological concept—a lens for how we are to relate to one another within the spiritual fellowship of the church. But what a travesty of Christian ethics to relate as an equal with one person of differing social status *within* the church, and then revert to a relationship based on power and coercion with them *outside* of the church. To do so would be the height of hypocrisy.

The same radical equality and freedom we are called to model within the church must be in place outside of the church's walls. We cannot tolerate any form of human relationship in which one person is held or trafficked in bondage to another.

Confessing Our Stance

In a sense, the concept of trafficking is the underlying issue in The Theological Declaration of Barmen (*Book of Confessions*, pp. 245–250). Only in this case, what was being trafficked was the entire church! The Declaration objects to the trend in Germany in the 1930s of churches viewing Hitler's regime as God's plan. This confession protests the sovereignty of Christ in the church being replaced by the state as the "single and totalitarian order of human life" (8.23).

The core principle of the Declaration as stated is: "We reject the false doctrine, as though the church, apart from this ministry, could and were permitted to give itself, or to allow be given to it, special leaders vested with ruling powers" (8.21). In the view of those assembled at Barmen, a "special leader" abrogated equality in Christ, threatening to take the church captive and force it to serve alien ends.

The church has been given freedom through Christ (*2 Cor.* 3:17). So how, in good conscience, could the church in Germany stand by while Hitler oppressed and killed entire classes of people? How can the church today stand by while individuals and systems traffic and exploit not just individuals, but whole classes of people?

Another confession, *The Confession of 1967*, protests not only inhumane behavior, but also the consequences of humanity's inhumanity. "... In sin, men claim

mastery over their own lives, turn against God and their fellow men, and become exploiters and despoilers of the world. They lose their humanity in futile striving and are left in rebellion, despair, and isolation” (9.12). Human trafficking diminishes the humanity of both the one trafficked and the one trafficking. It is sinful and evil, and begets nothing but more sin, evil and suffering. It charts a path diametrically opposed to God’s unswerving liberation, reconciliation and healing for the world.

Responding in Faith

It seems absurd for it to be necessary to elucidate what should be plainly self-evident about the wrongs of human trafficking. Yet it is a reality in our current social fabric, and the articles in this issue witness to the pervasiveness of human trafficking—modern day slavery—in our world today.

Women, children and men who are made vulnerable by poverty, natural disasters, civil conflict or a basic desire for a better life find themselves trafficked across international borders or within their own countries. Lured by promises of a brighter future, young women come from developing countries and are pressed into sexual slavery. Migrants on our southern border who cannot afford to pay a coyote’s



Photo courtesy of UNICEF

Children living on the street or in slums are more vulnerable to being exploited or trafficked. In Gonaives, Haiti, a 14-year-old girl living on the street works as a prostitute to earn money for food and clothing.

crossing fee are held captive, used as forced labor in a variety of settings from tomato fields to sweatshops. Children from developing countries in Asia, Africa, Central and South America, and Central and Eastern Europe are trafficked to the United States for the sex trade, child labor and pornography. American children and youth also are trafficked within this country for sexual exploitation.

We dare not, as the church, remain deaf to the cries of those in bondage, cries which God surely hears. It is time for us to hear and respond to God’s speaking to us

once more, urging us to echo Moses in proclaiming to those who hold others in bondage: “Let my people go!” (Ex. 5.1) Let us now put an end to this sin among us. 🍷

Thelma B. Burgonio-Watson is an ordained member at large of Plains and Peaks Presbytery.

*This article is to honor the spirit of the late Susana Remerata who came to this country as a mail-order bride and was murdered by her ex-husband when she was about to obtain her independence from him. It also honors women and men like her, who would resist domination and oppression, such as human trafficking.



Learn More

Consider having a personal or group study of The Theological Declaration of Barmen or The Confession of 1967, focusing on human rights and the role of the church in the world. Both statements may be found in *The Book of Confessions, Part I of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)* (Louisville, Ky.: Office of the General Assembly, 1999).

Visit www.pcusa.org/humantrafficking for more denominational resources, including bulletin inserts, General Assembly policy papers and updates.