

What Does the Lord Require?

In Cambodia, *After racking up an exorbitant debt with a loan shark, Kieu's mother sold her 12-year old for sex . . . The desperate mom secured a "certificate of virginity" from a doctor for her daughter and sold the girl to man who raped her in a hotel for two days. Following this ordeal, Kieu was sold to a brothel.*

American teenager, *Tessa was sexually abused by her dad for the first time when she was 7. Her drug-addicted mom was too consumed with her own issues to get involved . . . When Tessa was a sophomore in high school, she met Jared, whom she didn't know was a pimp. He showered her with gifts and dates, and often reminded her that no one else could possibly love her because she was "damaged." Jared soon convinced Tessa to sell her body for sex and would attack her and deprive her of food if she did not meet her quota. He kept all of the money she made.*

In Peru, *Oscar was elated when his cousin urged him to work in the mines in Madre de Dios where he would be compensated with "Chunks of gold" . . . After traveling for five days by river to Peru's south-eastern Amazon region, the 16-year-old was shocked to learn that his relative had sold him to the mine and that he would have to work for 90 days, moving wheelbarrows filled with rocks and sand to pay off his cousin's fee. Two weeks into the stint, Oscar contracted malaria and was left to die. Fellow deprived slaves kept him alive by sharing their meager rations with him.*

India is the world's largest tea exporter, but workers are paid such low wages, that the farms are also ripe for traffickers searching for slaves. Elaina's impoverished tea-picking parents earned the standard 12 pence an hour (18 cents) during the season. So when the garden was closed, and a trafficker approached the 14-year-old's parents claiming he would "change" their lives, they quickly agreed to send their daughter away with him . . . The girl was promised 1,500 rupees a month. Instead, she was imprisoned in her trafficker's home for four years where she started work at 4 a.m., was often raped and was not allowed to leave the house or contact her family.

(stories from: Huffington Post: Human Trafficking Survivors Open Up About Horrors)

These are just four stories of the evil that is human trafficking. Four out of more than 20 million around the globe. And of those 20 million, at least 5 million are children. Particularly at risk, in the United States, are the 1.68 million youth who experience homelessness, each year, and who are often drawn into sexual slavery to stay alive. In 2009, the 27th General Synod, of the United Church of Christ, passed a Resolution of Witness, calling UCC congregations to "Awareness and Action to End the Practice of Trafficking in Persons." This is how the resolution defines human trafficking:

Human trafficking, also known as "trafficking in persons," is the use of force, coercion, fraud or

abduction to exploit the person for profit. Victims of human trafficking are subjected to labor and/or sexual exploitation, which may take many forms including debt bondage, commercial sexual abuse of children, prostitution, pornography, bride trafficking, child soldiering, domestic servitude and forced labor. Human trafficking is currently the third largest criminal industry in the world today, after arms and drug dealing. It is also the fastest growing. (Since 2009, human trafficking has moved into second place.)

The resolution goes on to describe the extent of the problem: *According to the U.S. Department of State, approximately 800,000 people are trafficked across national borders, not including the millions that are trafficked within their own countries. In the U.S. alone, between 14,500 and 17,500 are trafficked each year. Trafficking in persons is also referred to as “modern day slavery” since those persons whose labor and livelihoods are exploited are threatened with severe consequences, including death, should they flee the situation. Women, children and people from poor nations are the most likely targets of human trafficking around the world. In fact, the State Department estimates that more than 80 percent of trafficking victims are women and girls and about 50 percent are under 18 years of age. Within the U.S., much of this activity is hidden from public scrutiny or ignored because of the nature of the businesses that utilize trafficked persons (massage parlors, strip clubs, etc.). In the current global economic crisis, it is likely that there will be an increase in the trafficking of persons as more nations and communities face economic stress.*

The “Biblical and Theological Rationale” for the resolution affirms our belief that *every human being is created in the image and likeness of the divine Creator, of God. Human trafficking denies the values of human life, exposes victims to serious health risks, endangers the mental well-being of victims and impedes the ability of victims to reach their full God-given potential.* It goes on to say that: *The prophets cried out against the exploitation of the poor and of laborers who are not treated fairly and compensated justly.*

We hear this cry in our reading from the prophet Micah. The setting is Judah, in the eighth century before Christ, at a time when Jerusalem is under threat of invasion by the Assyrians. Micah views the inevitable fall of Jerusalem to the Assyrians as punishment for the failure of the people of Israel to honor their covenant with God, particularly its provisions for justice for the poor. He lashes out at the corrupt officials, both religious and political, who exploit of the common people, and speaks boldly in defense of poor shepherds and farmers whose lands are being expropriated by the rich.

At the beginning of chapter six, God brings a covenant lawsuit against the people of Israel, with God as plaintiff and Micah as attorney. God reminds them of all God has done for them in the past, and condemns them for their unfaithfulness. The defendants’ plea takes the form of a series of questions, asking “What they we to do to restore the covenant and avoid punishment?” Does God want burnt offerings? Our best livestock and agricultural products? Will sacrificing our first-born children remove God’s anger from us? In Micah’s response, you can almost hear his weariness and disgust. *“He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord*

require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”

Micah’s words are a beautifully succinct summary of the covenant God made with the Hebrew people at Sinai. In just a few words, he gives us what commentator Barbara Lemmel calls "operating instructions" for living in right relationship with God. And Jesus, in his Sermon on the Mount, also gives us operating instructions for our lives.

- *Blessed are the poor in spirit.* Commentator Douglas Hare notes that, *The proud self-reliance that is fed by prosperity all too easily prompts forgetfulness of our dependence upon God.* We are “poor in spirit” when we remember our dependence on God and our need to seek God’s guidance in how we live our lives.

- Hare believes that when Jesus says, *blessed are those who mourn*, he is speaking about more than the grieving we do over our own personal losses. Mourning here has a further sense of remaining sensitive to injustice and sorrow, of not letting our hearts be hardened to the cries of others. We are *those who mourn*, for example, when we grieve for victims of human trafficking, or for parents who sell their children into slavery because they cannot feed them.

- *Blessed are the meek.* We don’t tend to think of meekness as a positive quality. But for Matthew (Hare), *the meek . . . are nonviolent people, who are humble and gentle in their dealings with others . . .*

- The fourth beatitude blesses those who yearn for justice, who long to see God’s righteousness prevail: *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.* This encompasses those who suffer the actual pangs of hunger and thirst—the poor and the oppressed—as well as those who long for, and work for, an end to poverty and oppression.

- *Blessed are the merciful.* Mercy was an important concept for Matthew. Twice in his gospel he quotes the passage from Hosea, which echoes our Micah passage, in which God tells us, *I desire mercy and not sacrifice.* Mercy is not just an attitude, it’s an *activity*— it’s something we do. We are merciful when we perform concrete acts of compassion, particularly when these involve people on the margins of society.

- *Blessed are the pure in heart.* One of the meanings of the Greek adjective translated as “pure” is “unalloyed, unadulterated, unmixed with other elements,” like pure gold. In this context, Hare believes that *the pure in heart* are those whose devotion to God is unalloyed.

- *Blessed are the peacemakers.* Peacemaking is not the same as living in peace and enjoying its fruits. The peacemakers are *those who devote themselves to the hard work of reconciling hostile individuals, families, groups, and nations.* This is peace in the sense of the Hebrew word *shalom*, *harmonious cooperation aimed at the welfare of all.* Even when the work of the peacemakers seems utterly futile, it’s never unsuccessful, because it keeps alive the vision of the *shalom* that God intends for all creation.

The last two beatitudes are related: *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake,* and *Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.* Persecution and being reviled for following Jesus were real and present dangers for the Early Church. Being a Christian could be worth your life. While being Christian no longer puts us in that kind of danger, we may find that trying to follow the operating instructions of Micah and the Sermon on the Mount, puts us in direct opposition with those who perpetrate injustice and act without compassion. We might even be reviled.

There are many issues today that call for our awareness and action, and I would encourage those who are interested to go to ucc.org and, under “Advocate for Justice,” join the Justice and Peace Action Network, which sends out email alerts on justice issues. And there are also some specific things we can do to try to “end the practice of trafficking in persons.” It begins with educating ourselves, and I encourage you to watch the film “*Not My Life*,” that will be shown in the church library at 11:30. We can support legislative action aimed at human trafficking. And perhaps, most of all, we can recognize the connection between our consumerism and human trafficking.

As noted in the “Interfaith Toolkit on Human Trafficking,” compiled by The Washington Inter-Religious Staff Community Working Group on Human Trafficking, *We live in a world of great wealth and great inequality, in which greater consumption demands lower cost. Our demand for more products and low prices comes at a high price— that of the slave labor of men, women, and children around the globe.* The Better World Shopper is a research organization that ranks more than 1,000 corporations based on their social and environmental practices. The other day, I went to the betterworldshopper.org website, and came away with several areas, in my own consumer practices, where I can make more just and compassionate choices. I encourage you to do the same.

The UCC General Synod resolution names human trafficking as “a crime against humanity and ultimately a sin.” Let us do all that we can to help bring an end to this crime and sin. God has told us, O mortals, what God requires of us: Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with our God.

Amen.