

Sermon for a Vigil to Witness the Lives of Undocumented Workers

(Preached in the midst of a series of Vigils in support of farmworkers)

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March 31, 2010 ·

The other day a congregational pastor friend and I hosted a dinner for our softball team. It was our first year as a team and we decided to celebrate with a pig roast. We decided to roast a whole pig in part for amusement, but also for the more serious reason of shortening the distance from farm to table.

We didn't hunt the pig down, of course. The closest thing to hunting we do is going to the grocery store, and I generally leave my spear and hunting cap at home. Although we did cut the meat directly from the pig, I'm sure we missed something by not slaughtering the pig ourselves.

One of the blessings of our commercial economy, and its sophisticated system of coordination, is that we can get lots of what we want for very little. We don't spend a lot on food; we have many objects which make our life comfortable for cheap. But the system is so complex that all the little agreements and exchanges that bring things into our lives and food onto our table become invisible. A child knows that milk comes from a store; they are less likely to know that it came from Bessie, who lives on an Amish Farm or in an industrial dairy farm.

All along the way are persons and agreements that are rendered invisible and easy to ignore. It makes it easy for products to get made, to be sold, and to buy. We don't think about how products become the things we buy, perhaps because we're busy and careless, our lives are fragmented and we don't have time to see.

Some of us, in the midst of having to pay attention to everything all the time – might even enjoy invisibility. But invisibility is often the first step to diminishing the humanity of another person, implicitly indicating they are unnecessary even though our entire system requires the work of people we have not seen and do not know. They are, in many ways, offering their lives to us.

So we have this vigil. Let us recognize here, this small gathering, that we don't know how we'll transform policy or the souls of the farmers who employ our friends. But as we light these candles and bear witness here we are simply saying: we see you. You are not invisible to us. When Jesus is crucified the church demands us to look: do you see Him? Look. Just look. This is what was required for the sake of your peace. Let it not be invisible any more. Let it be seen and known by you.

As the church we are called to see what had once been invisible; a system where we are all willing participants, complicit and cooperative, in violence. But we do not end there. Elaine Scarry writes that the body under torture is voiceless. The pain cannot truly be known by another person. Through the constant imposition of pain, the tortured becomes separated from his or her own physicality, dissembled and diminished.

And our responsibility as a church is to offer that voice.

We may not get it right. We may not have the perfect policy answer. We tread with great humility in the atriums of power that can impose their will for the sake of either profit or justice. But we can say something. And through this voice, we reassemble the body, and it looks a lot like a body with whom we should be familiar.

We may not always know what to say. Perhaps we just begin with a gesture – pointing to what had once been invisible. Or may be just say "I am." The first step of becoming visible. "I am. I exist. I am how food gets on your table. I am here." This is the voice of the voiceless.

It may give us life as well. It is as the Father says to us, "I am. Here. With You." This is what we say this evening. "I am. Here. With You." It may not alter the world in its entirety – that, perhaps, is for God. But we – by seeing them, by hearing them, by giving them a voice – we offer a little space, breathing space, the possibility of salvation. "I am. Here." they say. And as the Father says, as the Son says also, "I see you. I am here. With you."

Amen