

More Than a Metaphor  
Genesis 39  
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights  
September 17, 2006  
Pastor Dave Carver

The voices in the hallway got my attention, even though it was almost two in the morning. Kids, arguing. And the smell of pizza.

There we were on a mission trip. We'd had a full day of hard work, followed by a night of incredibly inspirational teaching by yours truly. And now it was time, I foolishly thought, to sleep. I went out into the hallway, where two girls were standing, holding a pizza box, glaring at a young man who, from all appearances, was truly enjoying the slice of pepperoni pizza he was finishing up. All three faces turned towards me, and one of the girls blurted out,

"Dave, make him stop! This is our pizza! We bought it, and he's just eating it!"

I was tempted to launch an investigation. As someone who is concerned about justice, I'm not excited about the possibility of theft – particularly in the Christian community. I started to speak to the young man, but before I could get out a word, he began defending himself, talking about some deal that he had supposedly made with one of the girls earlier.

Then it hit me. It's two in the morning. "Lights out" was two hours ago. Why was I even having this conversation with three teenagers in their pajamas? Whatever happened as to how this young man came to be eating the pizza could only be understood within the context of this: there had been a whole bunch of rules broken before we ever got to this point. And so I simply took what was left of the pizza, sent everyone to bed, ate the pizza, and got some sleep.

Have you ever been in a situation where you found yourself asking, "Why are we even having this conversation?" You are so far down a road of bad things happening that, while the complaint may sound logical at first, you know that something is terribly wrong.

That's how I felt when I read through Genesis 39. You heard the story – Joseph rebuffs the illicit advances of Potiphar's wife and ends up in worse trouble than he started. There are a lot of sermons in this chapter – some dealing with standing strong in faith, others with marriage, others with honesty and so on. I was thinking about how I was going to preach yet another sermon out of Genesis that hinged on illicit sexual activity (the third chapter in the last five weeks, if you've missed out...), but then I was struck by the question: why are we having this conversation? How did we get here? Why is Joseph in a place where he's having to deal with sexual harassment in the workplace?

As I thought about that, here's a line that hit me: verse 1: "Now Joseph was taken down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there."

What's wrong with this picture? The "wrongest" thing is NOT this woman's unwanted sexual attention. It is not her lies, her husband's anger, or Joseph's imprisonment. The "wrongest" thing is that Joseph, a son of the promise, a human being created in the image of God and called to serve God in freedom and in joy, has been sold by his brothers to a group of Ishmaelites who have, in turn, sold him to an Egyptian.

Here is the simple truth: people who have been created by God and blessed by God ought not to be bought and sold. Ever. If the folks back in Genesis 37 had been acting in this way, we wouldn't have a chapter 39 characterized by lust, power, lies, and intrigue.

Look, I know that there are some of us who have been Presbyterians for a long, long time who will say, "But Pastor, Joseph had to be a slave! God made Joseph a slave so that things would turn out all right in chapter 45." God's creational intent was not for Joseph to be sold like a basket of fruit at the market. God used the circumstances to bring good into the world, and we'll get to that next month...but for now, we have got to affirm that God's purposes are not honored when human beings are bought and sold as property.

I'd like to talk for a few moments this morning about slavery. I don't know about you, but when I hear that word, it's usually in one of two contexts. Sometimes, people will be talking about it as a historical experience. You might hear folks discussing the Civil War, for instance, or the long-term impact of slavery on the African-American community. People talk about slavery as something that used to happen.

And sometimes, because I work with teenagers so often, I hear someone make a crack about her mother, saying, "You know, Pastor Dave, it's like I'm her slave or something. She treats me so wrong..." And often, I respond by saying something empathetic like, "Like a slave, eh? So she makes you live in shed out in the field with thirty other people and doesn't feed you and has stolen your children?" To which the reply is "Sheesh, lighten up, Dave. It was just an image. A metaphor. Relax, ok?"

But the sad truth is that slavery is not merely a matter for historical reflection. For more than 27 million people in the world today, slavery is much more than a metaphor. It is a fact of life.<sup>1</sup>

Slavery is currently illegal in every country in the world. Yet according to the US Department of State, in 2002 there were more than 100 nations where more than a hundred human beings were known to have been trafficked. Our government estimates that there are at least 20,000 slaves in the USA right now, working on farms, in nursing homes, as prostitutes, or in other areas. There are more people enslaved in the world right now than there have ever been at any time in human history.

In 1850, the average cost for a human being was close to \$40,000

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, statistics are from [www.stopthetraffik.org](http://www.stopthetraffik.org) or "21<sup>st</sup> Century Slaves" in *National Geographic*, September 2003 p. 2-30.

measured in today's terms. But now, the going rate for a child in India is \$35. Parents who are desperate to feed themselves or their other children will trade a child to a factory owner for cash. \$35. In Israel, there is a demand for Eastern European women to work as prostitutes. Traffickers pose as employment agents who lure poor rural women abroad with promises of good jobs, but when they arrive in Israel, or Germany, or Switzerland, or Japan, or the USA, these women are delivered to buyers who will beat and terrorize them into subservience. Brothel owners can buy a young woman for about \$4000. If she doesn't fit into their system, she is sold – like Joseph – to the next willing purchaser.

“Awww, Geez, he's going to do it...No, Dave, don't do it...” Do what? “He's going to tell me a story and then I'll feel guilty. He's going to trot out some case study that will make me feel like dirt. No, Dave, don't do it...”

Sorry.

Juan Muñoz is about 35 years old. He was born in Campeche, Mexico. He came to the border with the USA looking for work. He was met by a man who promised him a ride from Arizona to Florida, where he would have a great job picking oranges. The ride cost more than \$1000, but Muñoz was told he could pay it off over time. When he got to Florida, he was a debt slave. Living in a camp near Lake Placid, FL, Muñoz was held captive with 700 other workers in a barbed-wire enclosed camp. Every Friday, these workers were paid by the growers for their work, but then the company who owned the camp would herd the workers to their own store where they were forced to sign over their checks. By the time they paid for rent and food, their debt was as high, or higher than ever. In April of 2001, Muñoz took his life in his own hands and fled the camp. He went to the authorities, and a raid was held. The three owners of the camp were sentenced to a total of nearly 35 years in prison.

Prjua, aged 9 and her brother Ajay, a boy aged 7, lived on Thane train station in Mumbai, India with their parents who were both alcoholics. Prjua and Ajay were regular attendees of the Asha Deep Day Centre, run by Oasis India, where they learnt to read and write and were given the opportunity to play. After attending daily for 3-months they disappeared. The project staff went to look for them. Prjua and Ajay's father told how a man had come and offered money for them and that he had sold them for the equivalent of \$30. That was the last the father and the staff of Asha Deep Day Centre heard of them. In that area of Mumbai every 2-3 months children disappeared, kidnapped or sold into prostitution, forced labor, adoption or child sacrifice.

“Oh, for crying out loud, Dave, can't you give it a rest? You tell us about people starving to death in Malawi or dying of AIDS in Swaziland. There's genocide in Darfur, and now slavery in a hundred places. Look, I'm sorry about that, I really am. But look at this congregation, Dave. You're not looking at a group of people who is likely to take a sex tour to Thailand or try to buy child laborers from Nepal. Really, Dave, I can't do anything about it!”

That's not true.

Here's something that I really can't do anything about: I'm in a “fantasy

football” league. I hope that this weekend, my team will be able to beat Jason Dix’s team. If that’s going to happen, then I need my wide receiver, TJ Houshmandzadeh, to have a big game. But he’s got heel trouble. How do I know this? Because I’ve checked the web fifteen times in the last six days to find out how Houshmandsadeh’s heel is doing. If he’s out for the game, then I may be able to play Deion Branch instead, but I’ve got to watch how his practice is coming along.

Look – I can’t do a blessed thing to effect change in Houshmandzadeh’s heel – but because I’m interested, I keep looking around and reading up on it.

Beloved, the truth is this: there are not many people in the world who have more power than you do to stop slavery.

When William Wilberforce was born, he was half-dead. He was a sickly young man, and his father died while he was still quite young. As he was growing up, British merchants raided Africa and sent between 35000 and 50,000 Africans to the new world as slaves each year. In the late 1700’s the practice was so much a part of the English economy that nobody, save Wilberforce and a handful of others, thought much could be done about it.<sup>2</sup>

But he studied and read and traveled and acted. Beginning in 1789, and every year for the next 18 years, he introduced legislation in Britain’s Parliament to outlaw slavery. Finally, in 1807, he triumphed and won passage of a bill making it illegal for British citizens to transport slaves. In 1833, the Slavery Abolition Act passed, ensuring the freedom of all slaves in the British Empire.

William Wilberforce was one man who followed God’s call, who did what he could and who prayed his way into changing the law and then the culture. One man, living 200 years ago.

What can you do? You can educate yourself. It may seem like a stupid goal, but I’m going to pay more attention to the issue of slave trafficking this week than to TJ Houshmandzadeh’s heel. Visit [www.stopthetraffik.org](http://www.stopthetraffik.org) and see what else you can learn.

You can pray – pray for the men, women and children who are trapped in this system. Pray for justice for them. Pray for wisdom and compassion from border guards, local police, customs agents all around the world.

You will vote, I hope. Which of the candidates for which of the offices has the best record for human rights and fair treatment? Will you find out? Or will you vote the party that you always vote simply because you hate the other guys?

The last thing that you can do is to look for places in your life where you can make a difference. Conversations you can have. Questions you can ask. Some place where you can jump in and be a force for change and for healing.

Why? Well, in Genesis 39 there are four places where it says, “The Lord was with Joseph...” Twice at the beginning, and twice at the end, we hear once

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/special/131christians/wilberforce.html>

more that the Lord is with the poor, the disenfranchised, the stranger, or the alien. If that's where God is, then that's where I want to be, too. Amen.