

"A MATTER OF CONSCIENCE"

INTRODUCTION Those of you who were here last Sunday will perhaps recall that the sermon concluded with three questions: "If not here, where? If not now, when? If not I, who?" You were asked to carry those three questions with you into the work week, and to keep them in mind in terms of witnessing for the values of the faith you profess, as a follower of Jesus Christ.

I never like to ask people to do what I am not prepared to do, and on Tuesday morning of this past week those three questions came back to haunt me in a strange and compelling way. Let me share the experience with you.

DEVELOPMENT It actually began the preceding week when I received a telephone call from someone connected with the United Farm Workers. I was not in the office when the call came in, and thus returned the call later in the day. The voice at the other end was asking for an appointment to talk about the United Farm Workers and the religious institutions of the East side. The concern sounded legitimate. I've admired Cesar Chavez and what he's done for the farm workers of this nation in recent years, and so an appointment was arranged for eight-thirty on Tuesday morning.

The representative of the United Farm Workers was on time for the appointment. She had brought along a cup of coffee; I made one for myself and then we started talking. She shared with me in a very quiet and sincere way the plight of the migrant farm workers in different parts of the country. She spoke of the great need to bring about a number of improvements in their living and working conditions. Off and on over the past year or two, I've read about this struggle and recalled a debate on the floor of the Annual Conference of the Methodist Church last June about serving lettuce at the meals of the conference. But this young lady was now bringing it home to me in a fashion that was getting through. She told me that the farm workers are asking for things like decent wages, and for toilets in the fields, for sanitary drinking water, for an end to child labor in agriculture, and for controls to be placed on the use of dangerous pesticides. There were some other things, too, but she asked, "Is this so much to ask?"

The farm workers, she continued, need our support if they are going to gain any of these basic improvements. She asked how she might go about gaining the sympathetic support from the concerned Christian community here on Manhattan's East side. I told her that in my judgement it would not be an easy battle to gain support and attention. The conversation then moved in the direction of how she might lift up these needs of the farm workers in this church. She showed me a leaflet and asked if it might be possible to insert it in our Sunday bulletin. My reaction was to grant approval - for it looked to be the right size for the bulletin, neat, concise, and besides I guess I figured it would give people something to read while I was preaching.

I mentioned to her that I had seen some of the literature of the UFW on a card table last Summer in front of Gimbel's, that I had been approached more than once to sign a petition in their support which I did. I mentioned that my wife had been refusing to buy iceberg lettuce for some time unless it carried the union label of the AFL/CIO United Farm Workers along with the stamp of the Aztec eagle.

I took a second look at the flyer and then discovered it was asking for us not to shop at A & P. Now A & P is the largest chain store in the nation and is selling iceberg lettuce from growers who have denied these requests. Here the

issues begin to get more complex and the questions begin to form. It also began to come a little closer to home for we do most of our grocery shopping at the A & P at 87th Street and Madison Avenue. I began to feel a little uncomfortable. I responded with something like this, "We're willing to continue to go along not buying iceberg lettuce unless it has the UFW label....but not to shop at A & P at all.....we'll have to think about that....it means walking a few extra blocks for our groceries and paying the higher prices of perhaps a Grinsteades....and my wife tells me she doesn't have much left over now when she comes out of the A & P..."

I think it was at about this point that our conversation began to take on a little bit more zest and excitement and a new dimension began to emerge in our talk. This representative was skillful. Now she began to talk about personal sacrifice. "Really....to walk a few extra blocks....is that too much to ask in order to help these farm workers....these poor exploited workers of American citizenship....is this too much to ask in the way of sacrifice to help them?" I waited for her to tell me that the extra exercise just might do me some good.

The peace and quiet of my Tuesday morning in the study had been strangely disturbed by this quiet, sincere and moving confrontation. The talk continued about sacrifice, about the importance of not undercutting the effectiveness of the United Farm Workers approach by shopping at A & P. She was getting through and my conscience was beginning to feel it. I tried to ease some of the pangs by telling her about some of our present commitments to help the disadvantaged here in our own city. I thought of our ministry to different people, through different programs and channels of service. I thought of those of you who are already carrying heavy burdens in one way or another for others - those of you already giving time and thoughtful concern to Inwood House, Interfaith Neighbors, the Boys Club of New York, Lenox Hill Neighborhood House, East Harlem Protestant Parish. I thought of our efforts (not too successful) two years ago when we got involved in the Adopt-A-House program and adopted four buildings on East 100th Street. I thought of the \$35,000 gift to Anchor House made last month by the Trust Fund Trustees and how this will eventually help in the rehabilitation of drug addicts. There are many fronts on which we need to fight.

"If only" she said, "If only we could get the Christians to understand the issues....to see the terrible plight of these exploited migrant farm workers... maybe we could bring about these basic changes".

SUPPORT OF OUR CHRISTIAN FAITH

It's funny how your mind works. Those three questions from last Sunday's sermon stayed in my mind. "If not here, when? If not now, when? If not I, who?" I sort of had the uneasy feeling that I was being tested. Maybe she had been in church last Sunday. I thought of some lines in the New Testament, too, of the Parable of the Good Samaritan and of how Jesus answered that searching and probing question put to him by a young lawyer, "And who is my neighbor?" I thought of those lines, too, that we heard read earlier in the service:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord".

The more I thought about it, the more I was compelled to acknowledge that the oppressed migrant farm worker out in the fields of the Salinas "lettuce bowl" of

California - or Texas, or Florida, or New Jersey, or New York - that he, too, is my neighbor. And according to the way I've been taught to read and understand the New Testament, there is a dimension of our faith that has something to do with our neighbor and his need - whether the neighbor is in the next apartment, in the next block, in the next state, or the next country. If he's in need, then he's a neighbor and that need of his should be on our heart and conscience and prod us to a response. John Donne put it so beautifully way back in the 16th century:

"No man is an island entire of itself..
Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the
main....
Because I am involved in mankind -
And therefore, never send for whom the bell tolls,
It tolls for thee."

BACK TO THE ISSUE

By this time it was getting on toward ten o'clock. She had another appointment to keep for which she was already late. We had talked for about ninety minutes. I told her that if she'd bring enough flyers for the bulletin late on in the week, we'd put them in. I told her that I would have to do a little bit of homework on this issue before I made my own personal decision on how far we'd go. I told her I was still a "sucker" for human need and that her quiet witness and words about sacrifice had gotten through. My conscience had been disturbed and some words of the late Halford Luccock of Yale crept across my mind: "It's the task of the church to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable".

Now I don't pretend to know all of the facts involved in this struggle, but I'm learning and my own homework since Tuesday has helped to put things in perspective. I've read a number of articles and editorials. I called the main office of A & P here in the city to talk to one of the executives. I talked to some knowledgeable people whose opinion I respect. I went to the conference journal of the NY Annual Conference to see what the Conference Board of Christian Social Concern had finally written or said about this issue. This is what I read:

"Farm workers are among the most exploited and disadvantaged workers in America. Having been specifically excluded from federal and state legislation which has made it possible for other workers to enjoy a decent way of life, they have recognized the need to organize themselves for self-determination. Cesar Chavez and other organizers of the UFW have chosen to work non-violently and to accept the life style of poverty and sacrifice in order to bring about social change in rural America. Their efforts have born fruit, bringing about contracts for 5% of American farm workers."

"The UFW is currently boycotting iceberg lettuce in order to bring about justice and dignity for over 20,000 lettuce workers. Because the lettuce growers have refused either to grant secret ballot elections or to enter into good faith negotiations with their workers, the UFW is currently boycotting lettuce."

"We affirm our support of the boycott of iceberg lettuce as a legitimate non-violent tactic to bring justice to lettuce workers, and we recommend to local churches that they take steps to urge members not to buy or eat lettuce for the duration of the boycott,

and we further urge local churches to raise the issue of the lettuce boycott wherever lettuce is sold or served."

As in so many social concerns, the issues become complex, and it may be that the matter ultimately will be resolved in the courts for involved at this time in the issue are the competing, conflicting claims of two unions: the United Farm Workers of the AFL/CIO, and the Teamsters Union. As I see it, the A & P is, in a way, caught up in the middle of this conflict as other stores are, too, and whether one continues to shop at A & P is a personal decision. We'll continue, in our home, to boycott iceberg lettuce unless it has the label of the UFW, and chances are that we'll walk the second mile, literally, and take those extra steps and not shop at the A & P. There are other things that one can do if you are concerned enough to do them, and perhaps a discussion of this can spill over into the coffee hour for I see that my friend from the United Farm Workers is in the congregation to offer guidance.

CONCLUSION None of us are as knowledgeable on this issue as we should be, but all of us, I feel, are sensitive to the voice of "human need". I think we need to listen, to learn before we make our decision and act. For good intentions should never be a substitute for good judgement.

When it comes to personal sacrifice, we haven't been called on to make many sacrifices for others - real sacrifices, have we? We who are the 20th century descendants of those who in the first century went to the arena to face certain death with the name of Jesus on their lips. Maybe our faith will be more real to us, more alive and more meaningful if we become more involved and make greater sacrifices for others. Recently I came across some lines written by the late Rabbi Newman who for so many years was the spiritual leader of the Temple Rodeph Shalom over on West 83rd Street in our own city. One of the students in the course I taught last month on the Religions of Man passed them on to me. I like them, and I share them with you here at the end of this meditation:

"I sought to hear the voice of God - and climbed the topmost steeple.
But God declared: 'Go down again - I dwell among the people'"

PRAYER As we direct our thoughts to the problems and issues of life in our society, Our Father, help us to think clearly, to study the issues carefully, and then lead us out of ourselves toward Him who is the purpose of all men - to Him who came preaching the good news to the poor and the disadvantaged, and to set at liberty those who are oppressed and exploited. Make us willing to make sacrifices for others. Help us to show forth in our lives something of the spirit of Him who made the ultimate sacrifice on our behalf.

"And on the night Jesus was betrayed, He took bread and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, 'Take - eat - this is my body, broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me'".

"Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me"

Hear our prayers, our Father, for others as well as for ourselves. Be near to those our loved ones from we are separated in these moments, by distance, but not by love and concern. In the name and spirit of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen