

# Saving Our Very Souls

sermon digest

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Isaiah 58:1-12; Luke 13:12-17

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From the moment of his birth, little Pravin's parents desired only the best for him. Both parents worked long hours in a Kathmandu carpet factory; and despite their meager income, they managed to send their son to school until he was seven years old. But then Pravin's brother was born, and his parents were forced to make a choice that no parent should have to make. No longer able to afford Pravin's tuition, they withdrew him from school. Pravin spent his days at home taking care of his brother, longing to rejoin his former classmates. The situation changed when a GoodWeave inspector, charged with freeing children from labor in the South Asian rug industry, learned of the family's plight and enrolled Pravin in GoodWeave's free education program, giving him a future with hope.

You probably have heard that the handmade rug industry of Southern Asia has one of the highest child labor rates in the world. More than 250,000 children between the ages of 4 and 14 are routinely kidnapped or trafficked and forced to trade their childhoods and their futures for endless hours of hard labor on carpet looms. Founded on the belief that if enough people are made aware of the situation, child labor in the rug industry can be eradicated, GoodWeave's public information campaign alerts socially responsible consumers even as GoodWeave works with importers, designers and retailers to guarantee that rugs are child labor free.

Gathering in the face of growing recognition of the toll industrialization was taking upon American workers and their families and communities, the Social Creed adopted by the Federal Council of Churches at its founding in 1908 pledged the council and member churches to the abolition of child labor. Speaking to the issue again in 2008 in the formation of its Social Creed for the Twenty-first Century, the National Council of Churches pledged its efforts to the "abolition of forced labor, human trafficking, and the exploitation of children." Some attacked the council's efforts in the twentieth century as being, at best, starry-eyed idealism and, at worst, blatant socialism. Some in the twenty-first century dismiss the council's efforts as inconsequential, at best, and abandonment of the gospel, at worst. The church and its organizations, some argue has nothing to do with meddling in economic and political issues. The church's work is saving souls. After enough souls are saved, such matters will take care of themselves.

True, GoodWeave is not a church-sponsored ministry. Its efforts and those of its parent organization, the RugMark Foundation, represent the efforts of people within the retail industry to police themselves. I wonder, however, how many of those who initiated RugMark's good work were informed and motivated by their faith. I wonder to what extent the outcries of people of faith and people of conscience that began in the 1980's and boycotts and threatened boycotts influenced the industry's efforts. Even more, I wonder at how anyone who has even a smattering acquaintance with Israel's prophets and the life and teachings of Jesus could dismiss concern for children's welfare as outside the church's field of interest or responsibility. What are we supposed to do? Pray about the poor little things and then go home and forget them?

The prophets of Israel railed against such a religion. Second Isaiah preached in the 530's and 520's BCE to exiles returning home to the devastation wreaked upon their land in their absence. Faced with the overwhelming task of rebuilding in the midst of sheer calamity, there were those who knew what must be done. They must pray and fast and keep up their religious duties. That, Isaiah told them, was not enough. "Day after day they seek me," Isaiah quotes God as saying, "and delight to draw near to God." Their religious concerns did not serve God: "You serve your own interest" (58:2,3).

Yes, we are aware of Isaiah's charges. The passage is familiar; but if you are like me, you grew up thinking it had to do with the religious rituals themselves. It was a problem of the Jews, not us. After all, Isaiah doesn't say anything about Sunday School pins or baptism and communion. He was talking to them. As I've become older and more self-critical, I've met the enemy, and it is also us. Religious ritual, whatever it might be, and religious experience, no matter how personal and deeply felt it might be, divorced from our relationship with others, is null and void. The prayers of religious people, whatever their religion, do not reach God (v. 4) if they are voiced in the midst of oppressing workers, quarreling and fighting. Prayers and religious ritual (theirs *and* ours) must be accompanied by loosening the bonds of injustice, freeing the oppressed, sharing bread with the hungry, housing the homeless, and clothing the naked. Then and only then will Israel and will we know healing. Then and only then will light shine into our darkness. Then and only then shall the parched places of our lives and nation become like "a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Then and only then will our cities become a safe place to live (vv. 10-12).

Jesus said it, too. Confronted with religious devotion devoid of concern for the welfare of one's neighbors, he was uncompromising in his denunciation: "You hypocrites!" (Lk. 13:15). Quick in my youth to attribute Jesus' anger to the failure of the Jewish people to receive him, I now see his anger directed at those of us who fail the test of compassion, whatever our religious faith. Surely, a religious system that allowed untying livestock to lead them to water on the sabbath would embrace freeing a woman—a "daughter of Abraham," no less—a woman bound by her infirmity for 18 years.

Walter Rauschenbusch and the leaders of the Social Gospel Movement struggled against similar efforts to restrict

the church's and individual Christians' range of interest and impact to narrowly "religious" or spiritual interests. Charged with being moved more by socialism than winning souls to Jesus, Rauschenbusch called for a broader understanding of salvation—an understanding which included but did not limit itself to the salvation of the individual. An individualistic interpretation of salvation and religious experience, he went so far as to insist, is not unrelated to the predominant interpretation of sin as selfishness . "To be afraid of hell or purgatory and desirous of a life without pain or trouble in heaven is not in itself Christian. It [is] self-interest at a higher level" [*A Theology of the Social Gospel*, 108].

To be sure, religious experience is critical. The Bible is replete with examples of intense personal religious struggle. Moses, young Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Paul, just to name a few, undergo soul wrenching experiences before God. Those experiences, however, were not focused on escape from hell or guaranteeing themselves a place in heaven. They were not an end in themselves but preparation for a task that lay ahead. "All were experienced with a conscious outlook toward humanity. . . . They were social, political, solidaristic" [107]. Each culminated in leadership and service to others.

The more we approach pure Christianity, the more will the Christian signify a [person] who loves [humankind] with a religious passion and excludes none. The feeling which Jesus had when he said, 'I am the hungry, the naked, the lonely,' will be in the emotional consciousness of all holy [persons] in coming days. The sense of solidarity is one of the distinctive marks of the true followers of Jesus"

—W. Rauschenbusch, *Theology for the Social Gospel*, 109.

Far from having to resort to some political party or theory to explain our involvement in efforts to improve the situation for children or workers or immigrants or the uninsured, the church and individual Christians can and should point to the very foundations of our faith. These are no Johnny-come-lately, hot political topics of the day. They have been mandated by scripture and church teachings down through the ages. Far from putting us in a hot house where we spend our time taking our spiritual temperatures, safely insulated from the troubles of the world that surrounds us, the faith of Israel and her prophets, the faith of Jesus and his church call us to raise our voices and use every resource at our disposal to save the lives of God's children—young and old.

In Wittenberg Germany in September 1933, Nazi sympathiser and Reich bishop Ludwig Muller threw down the gauntlet to those who sought to lead the church to stand against Hitler: "The old has come to an end," he proclaimed. "The new has begun. The political church struggle is over. The struggle for the soul of the people now begins" [*For the Soul of the People*, 4]. A dispicable character in the tragic drama that would soon play itself out among not merely the German people, but the peoples of the world, Muller nevertheless at that moment spoke a word of truth that exceeded his own comprehension. The struggle ahead would indeed be for the souls of the German people and for the soul of the German church. Neither religious ceremony nor heartfelt individual religious experience would be enough to deliver each person and every corner of the nation from having to determine in his/her soul where they would stand on the inescapable question of what they would do with Hitler.

And so it is in every time and place. Just as the prophets of Israel and Judah had to speak and act in the face of what the wars and exploitations of their time and place meant to them, so it is with us. "In these things," Rauschenbush says, "God speaks to our souls. When we face these questions we meet God" [108].

What about you? Where have you encountered God lately? And what has it prepared you to be and do?

We began the morning talking about children in South Asia. As we prepare to go, hear the opening words on children farmworkers in the United States.

Agricultural work is the most hazardous and grueling area of employment open to children in the United States. It is also the least protected.

Hundreds of thousands of children and teens labor each year in fields, orchards, and packing sheds across the United States. They pick lettuce and cantaloupe, weed cotton fields, and bag produce. They climb rickety ladders into cherry orchards, stoop low over chili plants, and "pitch" heavy watermelons for hours on end. Many begin their work days—either in the fields or en route to the fields—in the middle of the night. Twelve-hour workdays are common. . . . Depression affects them more often than other minors, a reflection of the cumulative stresses and burdens in their young lives. Only 55 percent of them will graduate from high school.

Under the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), children working on farms may be employed at a younger age than other working children—twelve (even younger under some circumstances) as opposed to fourteen. Employers may also work them for longer hours—in agriculture, there is no limit to the number of hours a child may work. In all other occupations, children under the age of sixteen are limited to three hours of work a day when school is in session. . . . An estimated 85 percent of migrant and seasonal farmworkers nationwide are racial minorities; in some regions, including Arizona, approximately 99 percent of farmworkers are Latino [*From Fingers to the Bone: United States Failure to Protect Child Farmworkers*, June 2000 by Human Rights Watch].

These are not our children. They are, however, God's children; and because they are God's children, they are also our children. Whatever their color, their country of origin, their native language, God knows and God cares for their suffering; and so should we. Viewed in light of the teachings of the prophets and the teachings and example of Jesus, you might even say our very souls depend on it.