

August 5, 2012 – 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Exodus 16:2-4, 12-15; Psalms 78:3-4, 23-24, 25, 54; Ephesians 4:17, 20-24; John 6:24-35

Today's readings offer us very practical but also challenging reflections. Who of us has not said—either out loud or in our hearts so as not to offend the cook—"I am sick and tired of this wretched food"? Which one of us has not asked ourselves how to change "this aimless kind of life" on which we have embarked? For most of us, this is a passing thought—one that comes as we sift through our words and actions at the end of the day. But, then we let it go—and, with Scarlet O'Hara, resolve to "think about that tomorrow!" But, God does indeed call us, daily, and in the depths of our hearts, to respond with generosity and yes, even with eagerness to the promptings of the Spirit in the readings of the day, and especially on Sundays. But it is not easy to make new choices—the complexity of life requires more than just good will.

This set of readings also calls us to look at more than our ordinary lives. In this time of financial uncertainty, we are all calling ourselves out of "aimlessness" to new kinds of choices. What is being called a financial downturn has meaning for every one of us here—and we need to know that it has other meanings around the world. In this 21st century we, citizens of the U.S., are now also world citizens, and we have to reflect on that reality and what this reality calls us to. We ARE inter-connected, whether we like it or not, whether we recognize it or not. This story might open the door for us to begin to grapple with the issues of the world community that are now in front of us.

Sok Chea is a young woman who is 19 years old. She is from a tiny rice farm in a village in the Kampong Cham province of Cambodia. Her education stopped when she was 11—in the third grade—because younger children behind her in the family needed care and feeding and their small rice paddy needed to be planted, hoed and picked. Desperately poor, her family sent her to the capital Phnom Penh when she was 15 to work in one of the garment factories there. She got a job, with a salary of \$50 per month for 10-hour days, seven days a week—with two days off each month. She lived with 11 other young women and each of them saved \$30-40 per month, depending on overtime pay, to send home—and Sok Chea was very happy to be able to contribute to the well-being of her parents and brothers and sisters. For Chea's family, it was the first disposable income they had ever had.

Then, thousands of miles across the world, you and I, reflecting on the gospel call to simplicity of life as well as our dwindling bank accounts and the dismal state of the economy in the United States, decided it was time to take action—to change our lifestyle, even in little ways. So, instead of allowing our teenagers to shop at the GAP, we asked them to think rather of the cheaper department stores in our area or even the local thrift shop. They got into the spirit of this, and made some sacrifices themselves—all very good things.

But, as we felt good about what we were doing, the GAP company, seeing a downward trend in sales, began to close factories one after the other. Eight of the 14 GAP factories in Cambodia were among the first to close. Because she had so little education and could not get another job, Sok Chea went back to her farm, not only losing the income that her family had begun to count on, but also she was another mouth to feed off the small subsistence rice farm. Some of her friends stayed in the capital and became "beer girls," slowly entering the sex trade to continue to be able to send money home to their families. Tens of thousands of young people, mostly girls, have lost jobs in garment factories in recent years.

There is no simple response to the call we hear in the gospel and these new world realities—buying more things we do not need is not the answer. But we need to read, pray and think about what we are doing. Often “green” solutions in our households and work places can be more expensive; doing work for people who are homeless and poor may take us away too often from family needs; committing ourselves to mission work for a time may put our children at a disadvantage; shopping for food at the cheapest places may put others out of business. We have daily, significant choices to make and we need to know how and why we are making them.

In today’s gospel reading, Jesus says: “You are looking for me ... because you ate your fill of the loaves.” Is Jesus talking to me—am I a Catholic because it is easy, a comfortable way of life that enables me to “fit in,” to go along? The people of the world do not need us to shop at the GAP so that Sok Chea can keep her job—but it does require us to know why we make the choices we make, to focus without flinching on the God-centered wisdom that clarifies the choices and calls us forth to follow Jesus—maybe not the end the ends of the earth, but AT LEAST to a life formed and informed by the Spirit of Jesus.

This scripture reflection was originally published in 2009.