

December 20, 2015 - Fourth Sunday of Advent

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Micah 5: 1-4a; Psalm 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1: 39-45

Some weeks ago, I accompanied a friend, also a lay missioner in Cambodia, on a visit to the community who lives by the local dump and sells scavenged recyclables. It was a slow morning spent tip-toeing from hut to hut across planks that spanned rivulets of raw sewage. In one home, I distinctly remember the face of a young woman nursing her first child. She beamed as the little girl slipped into a blissful slumber. The three of us sat on the floor together for some time. We hardly spoke, my “book Khmer” a far cry from the language I needed to communicate what I was thinking.

A nursing infant, I have been told, “communicates” her nutritional needs to the mother through contact. In response, the mother’s body produces more or less milk, this or that antibody. It’s a marvel, truly—nature’s way. This young Cambodian woman, with hardly enough to sustain herself, was giving her baby exactly what she needed.

In today’s gospel, we see Mary’s cousin, Elizabeth, praise Mary’s *fruitfulness*. Because of her openness to God’s will for her, Mary is called “blessed.” I too sat in awe of this Cambodian woman. Here she was a dump-digger, society’s “throwaway,” whose most *productive* day would render a full cart of bottles and cans. Yet she was *fruitful* beyond measure. She had brought a most beautiful child into the world, of course, and was sustaining her. The mother was also bearing fruit *in me*.

Other than giving her proclamation, we don’t see Elizabeth *do* anything. She is simply fully present to Mary. That is what I felt happened with this Khmer woman—she was present to me and I to her. By allowing this wide-eyed foreigner to just be with her, I came to understand the value of *presence*.

In the gospel, we learn that Elizabeth, who was once thought barren, was also with child. That young Cambodian woman made me recognize that I, like her, also had something to bear, something I would come to realize only through openness to God.

Ironically, the field trip was in the name of “ministry shopping,” i.e., looking for a ministry where I could be “valuable,” *productive*. While I had shaken the dust of corporate life from my feet a few years ago, this notion of fruit and fruitfulness had not taken root in me. It is not surprising that I, an IT-professional-turned-missioner, had not shed those notions of value and productivity. These ideas are hard to shake.

Our insistence on products and productivity has seeped into nearly every realm of our lives, it seems. And, it is not mere metaphor. We have productive days. We reward productive employees who produce good results. Education produces tomorrow’s work force that will later be called—God forbid—“human resources.” We speak of people as “productive members of society.” Those who do not produce we call “useless,” use-less. The disabled. The criminal. The waste picker.

It is amazing, really, how pervasive this concept is. Products and productivity.

But, thanks to products, our lives are easier. Unlike fruits, products can be easily stored, saved for later. For a rainy day. A bad “harvest.” An economic downturn. Thanks to products—and our productivity—we are more secure. Or are we?

In a strange twist, our production of more has increased our desire *for* more. The production of comfortable homes has increased our desire for bigger ones. Our purchase of the most recent gadget has heightened our desire for the next version.

Ironically, our consumption (the other side of the “productivity coin”) has made us *less* secure and unfulfilled. We have racked up debt at unparalleled levels. Our physical environment hangs in the balance, our emotional one as well. We’re anxious and depressed in our poverty, vulnerable and isolated in our wealth.

So it is with our products.

Cambodia, where I have lived for the past year, is a country with one of the highest economic growth rates in the world. But in a country plagued by corruption, such growth does not mean security for all and a more manageable standard of living. Rather, it means that the yawning divide between the haves and have-nots is growing at an alarming rate. In Phnom Penh where I live, the social divide is palpable. Pedaling though the streets, I pass women carrying baskets of produce on their heads to earn \$30 per month and dodge behemoth Lexus SUVs whose drivers paid \$100,000 for their prize.

Complicit in this process are other nations, near and far, who pull on one end of the supply-demand chain. Entrepreneurs with eyes on Cambodia’s resources sit behind the wheel of earth-movers and build beautifully smooth roads, roads sufficient to haul out anything above and below the surface that is of value—trees and rice; gold and copper; power from her rivers and oil from below her waters; cheap factory work from her daughters and sweat labor from her sons.

We think we need our products. And therefore we need the resources—materials, power, people—to make them.

This has dire consequences for the Cambodian people and their land. Maryknoll works with the inhabitants in the path of “development projects” who have been “relocated.” Thanks to deforestation, there is hardly a cool season and flood waters rise more every year, threatening harvests and livelihoods. Families are forced to sell their land—and their daughters.

So, for the sake of being more *productive*, our land and people are actually becoming less *fruitful*. But, our lives *and our livelihoods* depend on healthy people inhabiting a fruitful earth.

It is curious that we don’t see the connection between our demand for products and the ramifications for nations like Cambodia. That an ornamental table made of Cambodian wood is linked to permanent environmental destruction and climate change in a nation dependent on agriculture. That a shirt bought for \$5 at a department store does not actually “cost” \$5. It costs the life of the child of a Khmer factory worker, unable to take her daughter to the doctor.

Or maybe we do recognize these realities. Perhaps we find them overwhelming. What can we do? How could we “be” differently?

We return to the nursing child and the Cambodian woman. We take for ourselves just what we need. We ask ourselves, “What do I *desire*? What do I really *need*?” We also give from ourselves what is required. We recognize that the key to fruitfulness is relationship, connection to the Divine who nourishes us so that we might produce good fruit.

We return to Elizabeth. We acknowledge the blessings of fruitfulness, not merely productivity. We recognize that someone thought to be “unproductive” can be fruitful in ways unquantifiable and indeed unimaginable. Their fruitfulness is born of trust in God and love of neighbor. We are present. We see and learn. And, with Elizabeth, we give praise, “Blessed is she who believed that what was spoken to her by the Lord would be fulfilled.”

We return to Mary. We stop placing value on ourselves insofar as we produce. We strive to be *fruitful*—in our work, in our relationships, in our lives. We recognize that we, too, bear the Christ child. And, with Mary, we exclaim, “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!”

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