

In my mind’s eye, Paul looks a lot like Desmond Tutu of South Africa in his persistent and clever argument for what is right. Some years ago the Episcopalian archbishop visited Oregon; he spoke to a packed house at the University of Portland. But a real blessing was his spending time with a group of lowly preachers one morning. His presence is magnetic; his short stature emits great conviction and energy; his handshake is gentle in its power; his being is real-world-saintly and apostolic.

And so it is that I connect Paul with him: both speak to power with convincing argument based in love. Today’s reading presents such an appeal to Philemon, the “owner” of Onesimus, a slave. Notice how Paul works on Philemon’s sensibilities on behalf of Onesimus; he lays out a different way of thinking and an expectation that Philemon will do the “right thing.”

Paul’s letter is prophetic in that it reveals a truth: one cannot own another. It goes on to suggest an alternative without condemnation. It ends with an affirmation of the instinctual *mana’o*/understanding of Philemon. If Paul’s influence is successful, both Philemon and Onesimus will have a new identity, *na inoa hou*, in Christ. Their names will be linked as equals.

The gospel reading for today, from Luke 14, ends with these words of verse 33: “So therefore, none of you can become my disciples if you do not give up all your possessions.” ‘*Auwe!* Let’s avoid that one.

Or not. Because that passage speaks about conflicting loyalties, the black hole of materialism, the seduction of stuff over service. Of course, no one here lives in that tension... Clearly, that is only meant for haole churches in California...

How convenient to think that way, as some do. I suggest such persons visit churches in Cuba or the Philippines to see real, authentic, ministry in simplicity.

The reading from the Hebrew Scriptures is from Jeremiah—one of my favorite impolite figures. In chapter 18: 1-11 we hear:

Once again the prophet counters the pronouncements of the court prophets who are so connected to their retirement plans that they are out of touch with real issues of

the day. His inspiration comes from a very common source: the potter's process. The business of a potter is the making of pots. Pots, like gourds and calabashes, (and the ever-present, mismatched Tupperware) exist to hold something liquid so that it does not flow all over the place. The church community is similar, in that we belong together and find unity therein—nevermind where we come from or what our “pedigree.” In Christ we are sharing space within the creation of the potter's skill. Jeremiah warns of discord and calamity ahead because any pot can be shattered. *Ka inoa hou*/the new name for the people will come after they are reformed by the master Potter, through the hands of God. New identity comes through struggle.

Struggle or suffering is the norm of mortal existence, according to Buddhist philosophy. Suffering is often transformative, according to the biblical narratives. The struggle for justice is our gospel mandate. According to Allan Boesak, to say “Jesus” is to say “justice.” And we are reminded of the need for justice work especially at Labor Day. We are reminded of the hardships of those who toil in the fields and factories, in schools and offices, often for unequal pay and in unsafe conditions. Let us be mindful of those upon whose backs our daily lives are supported and let us be about justice for them as we have *inoa nou*/new identity in Christ, whom we recognize in the broken bread.

Here is a story about labor, identity, community, and bread. I'd like to tell you about Masao Torigoe who grew up on a plantation in Ola'a on the Big Island. He was not one to talk about himself very much; actually, typical of his generation, he didn't talk a lot, period. I met Torigoe-san in 1967 at Kokokahi Church. Upon learning where I'd grown up, northwest Ohio, he revealed that he'd attended college at Ohio Northern University (college, then) in the 1920s. That school is six miles from my childhood home!

Masao would sometimes tell how hard life was, working in the cane fields (suggesting quietly that the rest of us were slackers), and how he managed to get to school far away. He received a degree in engineering. However, he could not find work on the mainland. Could his ethnicity have had something to do with that? Disappointed, possibly disillusioned, Masao returned to the Big Island and took on the *inoa hou*/new identity of baker, and police officer skilled in Karate. It is Torigoe-san the Baker I knew. For communion at Kokokahi, Masao provided a loaf of sweet bread. Often I think of him when at this table of sacrifice and community. By the way, if you happen to come to our house in Sandy, Oregon,

you will see two Japanese lace-leaf maples, placed there in honor of Masao & Hatsuyo Torigoe. *Paha*/Maybe I'll tell a story about her sometime.

And so it is that we have a “great cloud of witnesses” surrounding us, still inspiring us, having taught us much about kindness, labor, generosity, equality, justice, and community—all of which are represented through our experiences around this table. One day WE will join that cloud; we trust that our witness has been of encouragement, joy, wisdom, and the labor of making things *pono*/right that will be formative for those who come after us and gather at this table, wherever it might be in the world.