

Reformation Series  
Peace, Seattle  
October 15, 2017  
Genesis 1:27, Acts 16:16-26

## **HUMAN BEINGS – NOT FOR SALE**

We're marking the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation movement with four worship services built around themes from the [Lutheran World Federation Global Assembly](#) last May.

**The central theme, and our focus last week, is: LIBERATED BY GOD'S GRACE.**

In the three weeks that remain, we're exploring the implications of this claim refracted through three sub-themes: humans not for sale; creation not for sale; and salvation not for sale.

**This week, then, HUMAN BEINGS—NOT FOR SALE.<sup>1</sup> Our first stop— western Nepal.**

The word for the practice is Kamaiya (if you're male) or Kamlari (if you're female). It means, literally, "hard working farm hand," or "hard working woman," but behind the term is a centuries old system of bonded labor that affects particular ethnic groups in Nepal and people of lowest Hindu caste.<sup>2</sup> And though the practice was officially outlawed in recent years, it remains a reality among impoverished families in Western Nepal.

Basanti Chaudhary, who now serves as an advocate against bonded labor, was herself a Kamlari beginning at age six.

Born in a village named Basauti, her family left their ancestral land when she was three to work in another village and pay off a debt. In return for their work, her parents received food, accommodation and an allotment of rice every year, but it was not enough to live on. So when she was six, Chaudhary's parents sent her to work as a bonded servant to a family in the same village.

"Serving as Kamlari means I had to support my landlord's family in all the domestic chores," Chaudhary recalls. "Since I was only a little girl, I had to take care of a baby at the beginning."

Later she took on additional chores. While other children in the area went to school, she was busy feeding the animals and preparing meals for the family to which she was bound.

The working conditions for Kamlaris vary, but being very young and in a position without rights means they're usually exploited and are defenseless against mistreatment and abuse. Often, girls are sold by their parents because their own family cannot support them.

Every year, 7,000 to 12,000 Nepali girls, ages 9–16, are trafficked from Nepal, mainly to India, where today there are more than 200,000 Nepali girls in Indian brothels. Yet these are but a fraction of the millions who are caught up in the \$32 billion dollar human trafficking industry worldwide.<sup>3</sup>

The US State Department estimates that as many as 17,500 foreign nationals are trafficked into the US every year, and that 100,000 to 300,000 domestic minors are trafficked within our nation's borders.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> More resources on this topic can be found the *Lutheran World Federation* website: <https://2017.lutheranworld.org/content/human-beings-%E2%80%93-not-sale-131>

<sup>2</sup> Read more about Chaudhary's story here: <https://www.lutheranworld.org/news/dream-freedom>

<sup>3</sup> [http://nepalmonitor.com/2007/06/combating\\_girltraffi.html](http://nepalmonitor.com/2007/06/combating_girltraffi.html)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.seattleagainstslavery.org/education/>

**For Yasmin Christopher the details are different, yet the trials of her captivity run just as deep.<sup>5</sup>**

Yasmin, her younger sister, her mother and a half-dozen other relatives, were brought to the U.S. from their native Bangladesh by her father, Stefan Christopher, to toil on his 65-acre farm near the tiny Grays Harbor County town of Oakville, Washington.

There, he fed them little, paid them nothing, sexually abused some of the children and beat the adults...No one from outside Yasmin's family could have guessed that her father—a well-spoken, well-educated man from a well-to-do family, a violinist with the Bellevue Philharmonic Orchestra who worked as a consultant for the United Nations—was also... a human trafficker.

Yasmin's childhood ordeal (she was a toddler at the time) and her father's eventual criminal conviction have made her a spokeswoman for victims of human trafficking.

"People don't realize that there's not one kind of trafficker," Yasmin says. "Traffickers do not have a stereotypical face. It can happen anywhere; in cities, the suburbs, factories and farms. It can involve the most unexpected people."<sup>6</sup>

**According to the United Nations, human trafficking is on the increase.** 155 countries are affected by human trafficking as source, transit, or destination countries.<sup>7</sup> An estimated 27-36 million individuals are in forced labor of some kind at any one point in time.<sup>8</sup>

The vast majority of the victims are women and girls between 18 and 24 years of age. And the most common form of trafficking—nearly 80%—is sexual exploitation.<sup>9</sup>

**Given its location along the West Coast corridor, and its quick proximity to Canada and Asia, Seattle is a main conduit for trafficking.** Examples of every form of modern day slavery can be found right here in King County.

**Friends, when we affirm with Scripture that we are created in the image of God.**

**When we make the claim that we are liberated by God's grace.**

**When we look at one another through the eyes of Christ, then we must state unequivocally: **HUMANS ARE NOT FOR SALE.****

**The setting for our lesson from Acts is the Roman colony Philippi in the district of Macedonia.** Led there by a vision, Paul and Silas find fertile soil for planting a church when Lydia and her household quickly become converts to the faith, and she offers her home as a base for their ministry.

What follows is a curious story full of twists, turns, and surprises. We won't delve into the whole saga but will focus today on Paul and Silas's encounter with a certain slave-girl. Verse 16 sets the stage:

**"One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling."**

<sup>5</sup> The story of Yasmin is excerpted from an article in *The Seattle Times* by Christine Clarridge. You can read the full article about Jasmine here:

<https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/putting-a-face-on-human-trafficking>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Excerpted from an article by Ebise Dibisa Ayana published in the LWF booklet, "*Human Beings – Not For Sale*." You can download the booklet, and other LWF resources, here: <https://2017.lutheranworld.org/content/reformation-booklets-human-beings-%E2%80%93-not-sale-131>

<sup>8</sup> <http://hagar.org.au/current-statistics-on-human-trafficking-and-slavery/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/global-report-on-trafficking-in-persons.html>

**That single verse tells us much.** Human trafficking in the Roman Empire was common practice. Nations and peoples who found themselves on the receiving end of the Roman military juggernaut could count on being enslaved and having themselves trafficked from their homeland to whatever destination best suited the economic needs of the Empire.

**Human beings as commodities were part and parcel of the Empire’s economic system.**

We know very little about this slave girl, but from what we do know she is doubly oppressed: first, by the spirit which possesses her and, second, by her masters. She has no freedom, no status and no control over her fate. She is valued by her owners only for what she can give them. To them she is a commodity, an object to earn them money, not a person who has the right to freedom.<sup>10</sup>

When we first hear of the slave-girl following Paul and Silas around the city, we wonder if she might play a role in their mission. (As it will turn out, she does—but not in the way we first expect.)

When day after day she tags along behind Paul and Silas, broadcasting their intentions, Paul becomes annoyed. Instead of enhancing their ministry, her constant interruptions are inhibiting it.

**So finally, Paul, out of patience, turns to the girl and orders the spirit of divination to leave her. And as her tongue falls silent the consequences are immediate.**

- No more fortune-telling.
- No more words to guide customers who are desperate to gain some control over their futures.
- No more income for her masters—all of that is gone; and the losses start piling up.

**The fate of the girl herself is unknown.** Her old way of being in the world no longer works; she stops being “the slave girl who tells fortunes.” Who she might now become remains an open question.

We can make guesses about what happened to her. We can speculate about other ways her owners may have used her to gain income; or how they may have put her on the auction block in hopes of getting some return on their investment.

I wish we knew what happened to her. I wish her story had a happy ending—or at least a better one. But that’s not the way of things for girls who are slaves to trafficking—either back then or now.

Did Paul think of the consequences that would come to this girl when she could no longer produce income for her owners? There’s nothing in the story to suggest he did. She just disappears from the scene though the story itself continues.

**Could it be that her story is intentionally left open to remind us that so many people need liberation?**

“There are many people around the world just like that female slave,” writes Rospita Siahaan. People “who are owned by powers outside themselves...They do not have the power to control their own lives. They are ‘occupied’ by others...living under bondage in many ways. It is these people who need to be set free, regardless of what kind of power might oppress them.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Bible Study by Rospita Siahaan, *God Frees us because Human Beings are not for Sale*, LWF.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

**While we may not know the fate of the slave girl, one thing we do know is that her exorcism has consequences for Paul and Silas. The girl's owners drag them to court where they are beaten and thrown in jail.**

Their accusers level charges against them as Jews, and we see how quickly the story of economic losses is embroidered with religious and political rhetoric.

**But it's finally what happens to Paul and Silas in prison that reveals God's deepest intention for them, for the girl, and for all human beings.**

An earthquake shakes the prison to its foundation, the jail doors open, the shackles unlock, and Paul and Silas are set free. This, finally, is the heart of this story: Jesus' power to liberate human beings.<sup>12</sup>

**Paul and Silas have already come to know this liberation internally, which is why as they sit stuck in a cell with their feet in stocks—instead of being overwhelmed and disheartened we find them singing hymns to God!**

**They've come to know the God who turns the world upside down.**

**They've come to know where the crucified and risen Lord is sure to be found—in the deepest, darkest places of imprisonment, offering hope to the hopeless.**

Sisters and brothers, when we see Christ's presence in that place, we can never look at another human being as a commodity, or as someone to be exploited for gain.

When we see Christ's presence there, we can never look at a woman on the street or on a screen as a means of self-gratification.

When we see Christ's presence there we can never look the other way when vulnerable people are being taken advantage of.

**The image of God in us works as a two-way lens...**

- It shines inwardly on our own souls, revealing to us how precious we are to our Creator,
- And it shines outwardly on others, so we can see that they are just as precious, just as beloved, just as needful of God's liberating grace in all its promising dimensions.

**Because we have been liberated by God's grace, we can say unequivocally:  
HUMAN BEINGS NOT FOR SALE. But we don't stop there...**

We go wherever Christ calls us to go, to protect young people from exploitation; to oppose slavery in all its insidious forms; to speak out against treating human beings as commodities; to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and shelter the homeless and the refugee; to be advocates for the dignity of all people.

**When Christ feeds us at this Table he makes his liberating grace part of our very cells, and God's image in us restored.** We become what we have eaten—the body of Christ for the world.

What gift! What challenge! What joy! Thanks be to God!

Amen.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.