



EIGHTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME HOMILY (A)

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No one can serve two masters. You cannot serve God and Mammon. "Si se puede!!" was the peace cry of Cesar Chavez, the founder and spiritual leader of Mexican and Filipino Farmworkers in California. This declarative statement was a response to a barrio called Sal Si Puedes -"Get Out If You Can." in San Jose California. (a place where he and his family lived) He confronted the dangers of his time using sacred scripture, fasting, and voluntary poverty as spiritual weapons. He echoes Sirach's approach to prayer at its most basic level: the prayer of lament. It is the utterance of a person in pain, of abandonment and betrayal. It is the cry of the poor and the marginalized.

The story of Cesar Estrada Chavez begins near Yuma, Arizona part of Atzlan or the Southwest, which was often viewed People of Mexican descent as, "Occupied Mexico". Cesar was born on March 31, 1927. He was subjected to repeated language bias and abuse at the hands of English-speaking teachers in segregated

schools. Spanish was declared the forbidden language. He would sometimes recall being tormented with a ruler across his knuckles for violating the rule--for daring to speak Spanish to other Spanish-speaking students including his brother. He remembered that he was like a monkey in a cage taunted by endless racist remarks by non-Latino teachers and students. He grew up seeing signs that read "whites only". He and his brother, Richard, attended thirty-seven schools as they wandered the farmlands in search of employment, food and shelter. The educational system failed Cesar and an entire generation of migrant worker families. But God would have the last word because they first sought the Kingdom of God and his righteousness.

Later in life, education became his passion. The walls of his office in La Paz (United Farm Worker Headquarters) are lined with hundreds of books ranging from Sacred Scripture, philosophy, economics, to biographies on Gandhi and the Kennedys'. He believed that, *"The end of all education should surely be service to others,"* a belief that he practiced until his death.

Cesar was influenced by Father Donald McDonnell, a priest from the Archdiocese of San Francisco. They often talked about St. Francis and Gandhi and nonviolence. He came to realize that even Gandhi always carried the New Testament with him. He

was often quoted saying that *"The fight is never about grapes or lettuce. It is always about people."*

He often had to confront people who viewed themselves as spiritually mature, devotionally correct and morally superior. Certainly, God fearing landowners that made major contributions to their charities of choice and funded progressive political causes could not be blamed for the tin metal shacks, the low wages and the life-threatening health conditions of Braceros. After all these were aliens and non-conformists who were a tax burden to real citizens of this country. By contrast Cesar and his ilk were superstitious and were prone to processions, the cult worship of the Virgin of Guadalupe and often wore scapulars and crucifixes around their necks. Certainly, the prayers of these lowly ones rarely pierce the clouds. But you and I know different.

In 1948 Cesar married Helen Fabela. They honeymooned in California by visiting and praying at all the California Missions from Sonoma to San Diego . They settled in Delano and started their family. First Fernando, then Sylvia, then Linda, and five more children were to follow. Cesar saw God as the source of his strength in all things. Once again, he was subjected to slander and defamation. How could he afford to have so many children? When will they stop? Is he killing his wife? He once overheard

someone within earshot say, "When will he stop breeding more Mexicans?"

Injustice was a constant companion in his life. Even the small adobe home, where Cesar was born was swindled from his family by dishonest Anglos. Cesar's father agreed to clear eighty acres of land and in exchange he would receive the deed to forty acres of land that adjoined the home. The agreement was broken, and the land sold. Later, he would say, "*The love for justice that is in us is not only the best part of our being, but it is also the truest to our nature.*"

Cesar thought the only way to get out of the circle of poverty was to work his way up and send the kids to college. He and his family worked in the fields of California from Brawley to Oxnard, Atascadero, Gonzales, King City, Salinas, McFarland, Delano, Wasco, Selma, Kingsburg, and Mendota. He was a man planted in fields of faith and in the humus of humility. He often carried the Sacred Scripture throughout his life. In 1942 Cesar graduated from the eighth grade. Because his father, Librado, had been in an accident and because he did not want his mother, Juana, to work in the fields, he could not to go to high school, and instead became a migrant farm worker.

A great teaching of this inspirational servant leader is “*“Once social change begins, it cannot be reversed. You cannot un-educate the person who has learned to read. You cannot humiliate the person who feels pride. You cannot oppress the people who are not afraid anymore.”* Cesar Chavez entered into eternal life on April 23, 1993, in San Luis, a small village near Yuma, Arizona. The footprints in the sand are those of Jesus who carried him from conception to natural death.

“Jesus’ life and words are the Good News. By His life He is calling us to give ourselves to others, to sacrifice for those who suffer, to share our lives with our brothers and sisters who are also oppressed. He is calling us to ‘hunger and thirst after justice’ in the same way that we hunger and thirst after food and water: that is, by putting our yearning into practice.” Cesar Chavez chose to serve God and not Mammon. He also taught us that, *“Preservation of one’s own culture does not require contempt or disrespect for other cultures.”* His life and legacy are a conscious choice to serve the one Master. For those who find it difficult to persevere in the midst of oppression...Cesar would say “Si se puede”.