

**Bricks Without Straw**  
**The Classic Squeeze**  
**July 6, 2008**  
**The United Church of Gainesville**  
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**Exodus 5: 1-9**

Here is the background of Exodus 5. In a time of famine the nomadic Hebrew tribes went to Egypt and traded freedom for a chance to eat, something anyone who has ever been on any kind of welfare has had to face. Moses has now come to the forefront of the story. He has received a call from God to lead his people out of this slavery to freedom.

Moses approaches Pharaoh and asks to take his people to the wilderness for three days to offer sacrifices to God. Pharaoh replies that these Israelites only want this holiday because they are lazy. Instead of giving the people a break, Pharaoh makes their task harder. They will no longer be provided with straw, an essential material for making their bricks. Pharaoh essentially says, "Let them work harder than ever, but don't give them the resources they had to work with before." It is the classic squeeze, bricks without straw. Produce more with less.

Classic stories last because they touch that which we all experience in life. Today again in America, in Florida, and right here in Gainesville, we are called to face more difficult challenges with fewer resources.

Consider the places we must make bricks without straw.

In the educational system, whatever situation you're in, whether university or the public school system, you are being called to make bricks without straw.

We here at UCG had just hired Josh White, the music teacher at Littlewood elementary school to be our children's choir director. Because the Alachua County School system is cutting the positions in music and art in half, Josh lost his position as music teacher at Littlewood. He will be reassigned to another school, he knows not where, to teach he knows not what. He says that with all that new preparation he won't have extra time on weekends to be our children's choir director. His story is just one of many.

Bricks without straw.

If you teach in the university or public school, over and over again you are given more and larger classes to teach and more material to cover. The directive to faculty seems very much like the words of the Pharaoh – "Produce more and gather your own resources to do this."

Bricks without straw.

When individuals or groups present their case before powers that be, their requests are treated like Moses' plea for three days to worship in the wilderness – foolishness and laziness.

You, the young people – children, middle school, and high school students - are called by a system that will ask you to meet the same academic standards, take the same FCAT tests, and the same SAT's, but the system will give you fewer resources in your schools. You are also called upon to make more difficult decisions at earlier ages. Friendships, sports, what kind of music lessons or other activities you will be involved in are issues for even the youngest children here. As you grow older you have to decide between friends and magnet schools, elite traveling club sports teams over school sports, even declaring major study arenas before you're old enough to drive. And of course for teenagers, the pressures of sex are everywhere. You know that decisions will have to be made quickly, often with little time to understand your feelings about love.

There seem to be few resources for making these decisions about what is right and wrong. Drugs and alcohol suddenly become a given for many parties. You are the generation called to solve the legacy of centuries of racism in your schools. The church tells you that God calls you to a life that has meaning and does something to help the world. The dominant culture calls you to make money.

College and university students are on your own. Where do you find a moral community for decision-making? You are in an environment of binge drinking, endless parties ( the burning issue that student government representatives keep bringing to city commissioners is keeping bars open to 3:00 a.m.), and fellow students who say in so many ways, "find your own straw, I'm making my own bricks."

The decisions are everywhere. The resources to make those decisions, the rules about what is right and wrong, the people whom you can count on to follow - they are like straw which you now have to find on your own.

This is the classic squeeze. Bricks without straw.

Women are in the same situation. You have the opportunity to pursue careers unavailable to generations before you. You have the responsibility to be knowledgeable about traditional male areas. Yet you continue to run into males who treat the upper levels of the power structure as their club. The new opportunities turning into new responsibilities are not substituted for traditional roles of motherhood, home, and family. They are added on. There is no turning back.

Bricks are required.

For men as well the pressures mount and the responsibilities grow. Time is the straw that is lacking. There is no past to turn to for guidance. There is no model of how this is to be done. There are no more hours to be added on to the day. The straw has to be gathered elsewhere.

Our political structure is quite Pharaoh-like, throwing tax cuts around and cutting services as if, as William Sloane Coffin, Jr., said, "The greedy were needy, and the needy were greedy."

You in this church gave quite generously, over \$5,000 in fact on Christmas Eve, to our UCG emergency loan fund that we have available to people in this church and in this community who are in need. People working in social services refer clients to us who need money for rent, utilities and food all the time. We figure we can hand out about \$450 a month. That money is usually gone by the end of the first week of every month.

Bricks without straw.

The government cuts social service funds and then says, "Let the private charities, the churches, feed, house and comfort the poor and the distressed." And now to add insult to injury, we as a non-profit will be charged \$1,300 next year for a fire fee, three times the rate charged industry, and 50% more than what commercial enterprises are charged per square foot. Is it mixing politics and religion to ask all of you to go to the city commission meeting on Wednesday July 16 and insist to know why our non-profit rate, which aside from being a tax, is two to three times the businesses are paying? And while you're at it, ask why is the University of Florida paying nothing?

So the classic squeeze is on in the church. We are a more crucial resource than ever in the lives of individuals in this fellowship, in the moral education and direction of our children and young people, and in the hope for peace and justice in our community, nation, and God's green earth.

We feel burned out and in need to balance our lives. But there is so much we are called to do through the church. As we expand our programs, stretch our building use to the maximum, and draw even more deeply on our financial resources, we see just how crucial even our physical structure is to ourselves and the community around us. Take IHN for example. First Baptist Church is moving out of town. Highlands Presbyterian Church is collapsing. Both of them have dropped out of the Interfaith Hospitality Network. We are needed even more to house the homeless. We need more churches to house the homeless.

Our church must produce more bricks, physically and spiritually. We need to keep our facilities adequate for program and staffing. We need to provide direction for our young people. There is much to be done in social justice, in peacemaking, in sustainability, in spiritual direction, in the fight against capital punishment, for the Interfaith Hospitality Network, for the Action Network, for the raising of our children, for the sick and those in nursing homes. If we don't make these bricks, who will?

Let's go back to the Exodus story and see what happens. First, the people called to produce bricks without straw blame their leader for messing with the status quo in the first place. They curse Moses for making them offensive in the sight of Pharaoh.

Today our world murders its champions of justice and peace. And our leaders pander to the voters' self-centered lack of vision.

I had a moment of false hope in a headline in Wednesday's paper, "Increasing Gas Prices Affect Attitudes on the Environment." Wow, I thought, there's a good side to rising gas prices. It's making people realize that we can't rely on fossil fuels forever, that we can't keep polluting the planet, and that we have to care for rather than exploit the earth. Not! The article was how people have given up environmental concerns and said, "Go ahead drill for oil off the coast. Environmental protection be damned."

The people blame Moses. Moses, then, blames God, asking "O Lord, why have you done this to my people?"

What are the solutions?

First, every one of us is called by God to put our lives in God's hands and follow a deeper mission of justice for all. Each of us has a gift, a charisma, a leadership role we can play in getting us through and finally out of this mess. We may feel like Moses felt at first, incompetent and too weak to lead. But if we wait and listen, we will find the way our gifts can raise us and those around us above business as usual. With God there is an Exodus, a liberation ahead.

Second, there's my mother's interpretation of this story. When I was a child, she read this story to me out of our bible story book and told me that the Pharaoh's orders to make bricks without straw had the opposite effect he intended. Instead of breaking their wills, it made the Israelites stronger. I have never forgotten that. There are no saints who did not know struggle. A character in an Alan Paton novel speaks with pride of the scars he bears from the struggle for racial justice in South Africa. "I would hate to die and go to heaven without scars. For then God would ask, 'Was there nothing left worth fighting for?'"

We persevere for the long haul, refusing to accept Pharaoh's definition of the world, refusing to be victims, building strength through struggle, and finding power in our scars and wounds.

Third, we realize that we only become victims when we accept Pharaoh's definition of reality. In the long run, we lose only when we accept this status quo. We lose when we accept that the Pharaohs of this world can divide us and set us against each other. Paul said, "We are often troubled, but not crushed; sometimes in doubt, but never in despair; there are many enemies, but we are never without a friend, and though badly hurt at times, we are not destroyed," (II. Corinthians 4:7-9).

The key here is that we are not crushed because we are part of a God-given community that will not be destroyed.

The Israelites did not give up, nor were they beaten down by the charge to make bricks without straw, just as early Christians were not beaten by Nero, nor the dissenting religious reformers beaten by persecution, nor Blacks beaten by slavery, nor Jews beaten by the Holocaust. They were not destroyed because they understood their liberation and their salvation to be together in solidarity with each other and with God.

As the spiritual “Jacob’s Ladder” says, we climb each rung together. And every rung, climbed together, will make us stronger - brothers, sisters all.

This is precisely where God called the Israelites to their journey of redemption. This is precisely where God enters our lives. We are in this classic squeeze together, with each other, and with God. It is the struggle of an Exodus people, 5000 years old. We are that people too. We have no other way to go.