

One Conversation Away from Conversion

C Lent 2--Luke 13:31-35

The radio show, *This American Life*, tells the story of a man named Francisco Risso who is the director of the Western North Carolina Worker's Center, which advocates for people who work in poultry factories.ⁱ Risso has been trying to help the workers at a Case Farms poultry plant to unionize. Now Case Farms is one of the worst offenders in an industry already known for poor pay, dangerous conditions, and terrible labor relations. (In a recent study of one plant, 70% of workers said they'd gotten sick or injured at their jobs in the previous year.) And so, not surprisingly, the Case Farms workers' complaints about dangerous machine speeds and not getting bathroom breaks, and their subsequent attempts to unionize, have been met with stonewalling and union-busting by management.

So Risso decided to try a different tack. It turned out that his wife worshipped at a local Episcopal church where a man named Ken Wilson. Wilson was the Case Farms Director of Human Resources and stood at the center of the plant's anti-union campaign, so Risso approached the priest at this church, Father Bruce Walker, to see if he might engage Wilson in some conversation. As Risso put it, he was hoping that the two could "reflect on what the situation was" and "talk about what the church says about workers and how we're supposed to treat the poor...not that [Wilson] would be shamed into doing something but that his heart would really be touched and he'd see how he's supposed to act."

So Father Walker went to the plant on the day of a union vote and tried to encourage Wilson to dialogue with the workers. Wilson politely refused, but Walker could tell that he was not happy about his presence there. After that, despite several attempts at reconciliation by Walker, Wilson quit attending his church. A few years later, Wilson moved to a different part of the state.

So by any external measure, the religious gambit was an utter failure. Case Farms has continued to exploit its employees, and worker morale has reached a new low. But interestingly, for his part, Risso remains hopeful. He has already begun to look into where other Case Farm managers attend church to see if their pastors will talk with them. As the narrator of this radio story put it, "He believes that people are basically good, which means the union-busting manager is always just a conversation away from conversion." And Risso points to the many examples of such conversions in scripture, particularly Saul, who was one of the church's most vicious persecutors before he was blinded by a light on the way to Damascus and became the great Christian saint, Paul.

Did you catch that? Risso believes that people are basically good. He believes that any given person--even an unrepentant apologist for worker exploitation--is just a conversation away from conversion. And so he continues his work, despite its setbacks and discouragement, with a heart that remains open to the humanity of his adversaries and to the fact that they are loved, and could yet be transformed, by God.

Well, my friends, that's faith. That's faith. And it put me in mind of Jesus' lament over Jerusalem in today's gospel reading. Jerusalem, of course, is the seat of religious and political power in Judea. So when Jesus decries the way it kills prophets and stones those who are sent to it, he is really talking about how any powerful system tries to

silence the voices of those who call for justice. If we were to map our Case Farms story to Jesus' pronouncement, assigning the roles would not be hard. Ken Wilson and Case Farms are the corrupt Jerusalem while Risso, Father Walker, and the workers are the prophets that Jerusalem stones for promoting justice and equality.

But before we can dust off our hands, comforted in our identification with the good guys and our feelings of moral superiority to the bad guys, we need to pay attention to the tone of Jesus' cry: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" Do you hear how reluctant the judgment is? How much Jesus yearns for Jerusalem to turn from its path of oppression and abuse? How deeply he desires to gather its "children," the Ken Wilsons of the world, in an embrace of love?

It's so easy just to write people off, isn't it. It's so satisfying to cast them as the enemy and close off our hearts to their humanity. And we live with a thousand temptations to do so, from the fear-mongering that our political parties fling at each other, to the recent road rage incident in Saline when a woman threw a pop can at another driver for honking when she started drifting into his lane. But Jesus doesn't go in for this kind of demonizing others. Jesus weeps over the sins of his own executioners, and leaves the door to their conversion perpetually ajar. To him they are all, always, children of God, beloved brothers, potential Saint Pauls. That is the example that Jesus sets for us. And for his part, with his unquenchable hope that Case Farms managers might be touched by the plight of their workers, Francisco Risso shows us how to follow that example.

ⁱ This story and quotations taken therefrom come from "Episode 369: Poultry Slam," *This American Life*, originally broadcast in November 2008, rebroadcast 11/22/2009, accessed online at www.thisamericanlife.org.