

These Bones Can Live

Two and a half weeks ago, one of my sons – Benjamin, broke both the bones in his forearm. Best I can understand, he was jumping on the jungle gym from one swinging thing to another, flipped backwards, and landed on his arm. I do not know where he gets this wildness from.

But it has gotten me thinking about bones.

While the two bones are healing they put Ben in a large plaster cast – up over his elbow. But the cast is fragile. It can't get wet, it can't get bashed around or it won't last. It has seemed a little like the early years of our work...two broken communities – religion and labor...held together with a fragile cast. I'm told that next week, if the bones are healing right, he'll progress to a fiberglass cast, which is supposed to be smaller and stronger. But our relationships have deepened in the last few years. Our cast is not so fragile. Our bones are starting to heal. We're ready to move to the fiberglass cast.

As many of you know, I'm a lover of Scripture. So of course with my current bone interests, I was drawn to the 37th chapter of Ezekiel. Let me read the Scripture.

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Let me suggest a few messages from this passage for us today in this passage.

Don't be discouraged by the dry bones....it's not the end of the story.

I don't know about you, but I see a lot of dry bones...

In our congregations
our seminaries
our denominations
certainly our Congress
and even our union partners.

But the passage is clear. The valley may be littered with dry bones...but it is not the end of the story. And frankly, in the last ten years, we've seen improvement in all these areas, except Congress. Its worse than ever. Those are some VERY dry bones.

Congregations like those we joined in Pilsen yesterday are regularly supporting workers. Dozens of seminaries are teaching worker justice issues or sending students to seminary summer. A few denominations have some staffing focus on labor issues (although not too many). And more and more unions are partnering with us on labor issues.

God offers a five-part plan for bringing life to bones.

1) Dry Bones Must Hear the Word of God.

The word of God, as it is described throughout the book of Ezekiel, is the restoring of community. To my dear WILG friends who are getting a tour through the Bible - Daniel, Amos, Habakkuk - I'm afraid this one is a tad longer - 48 chapters. But you should read it. Ezekiel calls for an end to violence and economic injustice.

Like most of the prophets, Ezekiel tries different ways to describe God's word, but hard as one might try, you can't avoid the economic message. At one point, Ezekiel describes what is a good man (and we'll translate this to good person): There are six characteristics of the good person in God's community. The first two are not bowing down to idols and eating unclean food offered to idols. The second is to not sleep with your neighbors' spouse. The next three are all about economic relationships.

- * Don't rob or cheat your neighbor. How many companies how wage and hour violations. The number one problem all our workers' centers see is wage thievery....workers not paid for their work. Robbing and cheating our neighbors.

- * Give food to the needy. And we know this isn't just about soup kitchens, because the soup kitchens are filled with people who work fulltime but don't earn enough to feed their families. This is about living wage jobs.

- * Don't take interest from your wealth (usury). Obviously strong prohibitions within Islamic law. Not just about mortgages. Those with money shouldn't be able to make money off of others.

And in case we missed it, the word also says we need to treat well immigrants, orphans and widows. Not doing so well with any of them.

This economic message is central to the word of God.

The passage in Ezekiel 2:4 recognizes that sometimes the dry bones don't receive us well. It says, "the people to whom I am sending you are obstinate and stubborn. Whether they listen or fail to listen, they will know that a prophet has been among them."

Any of you ever tried to talk with a manager of a religious hospital? Or a sweatshop owner. Or Mr. Lombardi, head of La Casa del Pueblo. Some serious dry bones, but it is still our job to help them hear the word of God.

But these dry bones are also within us. We lose sight of the priorities in our lives...what it means to be a good person. The relationship with God and our neighbors gets lost in the busyness of our lives.

We've got to make sure that the dry bones within us and around us hear the word of God...

2) Dry Bones Must Start Rattling.

The text is clear, when the bones start coming together, there is some rattling. I think we see some bone rattling when we try to bring folks together. There are tensions. Especially folks that haven't been together. Especially some dry bones.

We're trying to do a new thing...that the powers that be don't want and that our history makes harder.

We have a vision of Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, Hindus all working together. There's a little bone rattling when that occurs.

We have a vision of poor congregations and more well off congregations working together for the good of us all. But....there's a little bone rattling. Class is masked, but is a central division of the society.

We believe that despite the institutional racism in our society and the nation's history of oppression, we can build a multi-racial movement, but there will be some bone rattling. We're going to see this in the hotel work. We see it in workers' center work around day-labor work.. We see it in the Smithfield plant. We will see it in the security organizing. There is bone rattling.

And as we move from partnership to marriage with the shared values between religion and labor, our dry bones will be rattling.

We've seen rattling. We're going to see more. It's OK.... We're doing a new thing. These bones will rattle.

3) Dry Bones need muscle and tendons.

For these dry bones to get up and walk, they need muscle and tendons. The next few years, must be one of growing the capacity of the organizations.....putting muscle and tendons on those rattling bones.

Places for growth:

1) **Young people**.... Limitless options. Woman from Perkins in my car yesterday.....wants to engage the law students with the seminary students. Look at some of the new leadership. Rebekah Jordan...

2) **Money**...got to do this in much more serious ways. I was talking with some of the CA leaders yesterday about the challenge. Every group is struggling. Focus on individual giving...our friends, our families. Explore Cy-Pres funds. Plan events. Totally push the envelope.

3) **Media**.....afterthought. Must become forethought... Our collective work is excellent. Op-ed network. Systematic distribution of articles. Habakkuk Plan.

4) **Public Policy Capacity**....state and national

* we're still pushing living wages – Syracuse just yesterday

* NY Religion-Labor — improvements for farmworkers and increase in the state minimum wage.

* CA – fighting on employer mandates on health care. Haven't won yet, but you will. Your new commitment to working statewide will help.

* Chicago Interfaith and three other workers centers in Chicago just won the strongest state Day Labor legislation in the country.

5) **Workers Centers**.. These are exciting... Settlement houses of old. Catholic Labor Schools. Engaging workers directly in direct action and organizing solutions.

6) **Collective Campaigns**. The partnerships with unions are expanding. Not just local city efforts, but multi-city efforts.

Muscles and tendons around our dry bones.

4) Prophecy to the bones. Tell the bones that God can fill them. God can change them. God can use them.

It is our job to offer hope. Nobody wants to be a dry bone in the valley. But they don't believe that they can do anything. They need us to tell them.

Look around this room. So many of you are prophesying to the bones. You are cheerleaders...pushing the bones. Assuring them that God can fill them.

I love being with Laurie Coskey....always so positive. Bishop DeWitt is always convinced that the owner of Mount Olive Pickles or Cintas will hear God's call for change.

5) God sends his spirit. When we do our part – the first four parts of God's plan. God sends God's spirit. This work is more than us. God's spirit is in it.

These bones can live. The dry bones in the valley is not the end of the story. But the dry bones need us.

We've got to:

Help them hear the word of God.

Allow the bones to rattle a little.

Build the muscle and tendons.

Offer hope to the bones..

And then, God spirit will come upon us all. You are amazing. These dry bones will live.