Commentary / Politics / Climate Justice

LOVING THY NEIGHBOR VS. UPGRADING YOUR IPHONE

BY MATT BERNICO

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An artisanal miner works at a cobalt mine-pit in Tulwizembe, Katanga province, Democratic Republic of Congo, November 25, 2015. Credit: Reuters/Kenny Katombe.

The foundation of any good Sunday school education is the parable of the good Samaritan (**Luke 10:25-37**). In the parable, a lawyer challenges Jesus, asking him what they have to do to receive eternal life. Jesus answers, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." The lawyer replies by asking a question, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus then tells the parable of the good Samaritan, which I'll circle back to momentarily. But first, the question of "Who is my neighbor?" is worth more of our consideration.

This is a question that the entire apparatus of our capitalist political economy makes hard to figure out. Global supply chains obscure who our neighbors are and what their struggles are. For example, the fact we can buy a product in the United States even though it is made in another country under terrible labor conditions allows us to abstract ourselves from the ways in which we contribute to exploitation on a global scale. Workers with names and families become abstracted as labor power to be bought and sold. As a result, capitalist production hides the exploitative conditions that make our lives possible.

In response, Christians need better analytical tools that can help us parse out the systems of global exploitation. These systems keep us from loving our neighbors from *every* nation, which is a central emphasis of the gospel. For example, investigating who is producing the products we buy and under what labor conditions they work can show us where our neighbors are hurting and how we're implicated.

Here's a case study: We have our work cut out for us when it comes to climate change. Unless humans cut carbon emissions drastically, our planet will heat up, causing catastrophic floods, droughts, more intense storms, and mass extinction events for all kinds of creatures. So far, the world's governments have punted the problem of carbon emissions to the markets. The hope is that consumers will wean themselves off of fossil-fuel-reliant technologies and move toward "green" alternatives like electric cars and bikes. While electric vehicles seem integral to a green future, they also carry a troubling human cost that is hidden away in the machinations of the market.

Cobalt, an essential metal in the production of lithium-ion batteries (which power everything from power tools to electric cars) is predominantly mined in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Congo holds 3.4 million tons, or nearly half, of the world's cobalt supply. Cobalt mining is an industry with many **documented human rights violations**. Dangerous working conditions, child labor, sexual abuse, and devastating effects on local ecosystems are all features of how electric vehicles and other consumer electronic goods get their batteries.

WHEN IT COMES TO THE QUESTION OF "WHO IS OUR NEIGHBOR?" WE NEED TO THINK MATERIALLY ABOUT HOW OUR OWN CONSUMERISM AND RESPONSE TO CLIMATE CHANGE DEPEND ON THE LABOR AND EXPLOITATION OF OTHER PEOPLE IN THE WORLD.

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Fr. Jacques Nzumbu, a Congolese Jesuit priest who studies the political economy of conflict minerals, told Sojourners by email that there have been "10 million deaths linked to the stakes of mines and wars" in the Congo. Encountering these horrors, a North American reader might think, "Terrible! But that seems like a problem for the Congo to figure out." But, the problem here doesn't simply rest on the Congo but ultimately in the global North's *demand* for cobalt technology.

The owners of these mining companies are mostly located in the global North, namely Canada. Nzumbu wrote that "The Toronto Stock Exchange (TSX) and the TSX Venture Exchange (TSXV) are the world's leading stock exchanges for exploration and mining. In 2020, these two exchanges raised 34 percent of equity capital or $7.5 billion globally ... These figures show how much of Canada is mining, and mining is Canada." In other words, the economy of Canada is deeply reliant on the **exploitation of the Congo**. Because of the global North's consumption patterns and desire for cheap electronics, consumers are responsible for exploiting workers in the Congo and elsewhere in the global South.

For some Christians in Canada, embracing an international understanding of who their neighbors are has led to an emphasis on standing with the people of the Congo, as well as people in other countries, who suffer due to exploitative mining companies. Jenny Cafiso, the executive director of **Canadian Jesuits International** (CJI), an organization that advocates for mining justice in Canada as a member of the Canadian Network on Corporate Accountability (CNCA), wrote to Sojourners in an email, "As Christians, we are called to love and serve our neighbor, and to see every human being as the image and likeness of God. We, therefore not only have a role in speaking out against anything that infringes on the dignity of every human being but an obligation to do so if we are true to our Christian faith."

Cafiso and CJI's understanding of their faith has moved them to campaign for legislation that aims to hold mining companies accountable for their labor practices. For example, CJI is lobbying Canadian lawmakers to pass **Bill C-262**, which would require Canadian companies to exercise due diligence when it comes to human and environmental rights in their global supply chains.

"Practicing love ... means being aware of the impact that our government, our businesses, and our own choices are having on the poor, marginalized communities," Cafiso wrote.

She emphasizes that this is not only a macro problem but also an individual problem with the global North's consumption habits. Cafiso notes the ways our desire for upgraded phones every year has a direct impact on mining operations in places like the Congo. Your new phone feeds the demand for more cobalt mined by companies with damning records when it comes to human rights violations.

Again, the problem of exploitation in the supply chain is systemic, but it is also personal. By working at both the macro and micro levels, we can practice materially loving our neighbors.

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Returning to the good Samaritan, Jesus' story tells us about a person who has been robbed and left for dead on the side of the road. Passersby ignore the situation. Finally, a Samaritan walks past and goes out of his way to save the person dying on the side of the road. There's a lot to be said **historically about this parable**, but what's important for now is that this parable instructs us to identify a stranger as our neighbor. The parable suggests a type of personal compassion that recognizes we're in some way bound up with those who are suffering, even if they are from a different nation, ethnicity, race, religion, etc.

In Pope Francis' encyclical ***Fratelli Tutti***, he says, "The parable shows us how a community can be rebuilt by men and women who identify with the vulnerability of others, who reject the creation of a society of exclusion, and act instead as neighbours, lifting up and rehabilitating the fallen for the sake of the common good." Francis' focus on the structural

side of the good Samaritan is helpful. The goal is not just to stop by and help one person who is in need. That's undoubtedly good, but instead, the goal is to create a whole society where Christians repair social alienation with love and solidarity.

When it comes to the question of "Who is our neighbor?" we need to think materially about how our own consumerism and response to climate change depend on the labor and exploitation of other people in the world. If we can look behind the veil of capitalist production, we see the lives of our neighbors being systematically destroyed. Another way to summarize this is to simply say that our neighbors have been left dying on the side of the road. With this in mind, we can begin organizing and working toward a world and economy without exploitation.

Fr. Jean-Marc Ela, the Cameroonian priest and liberation theologian, wrote extensively about how production in the global North has long relied on the exploitation of the people and resources of Africa.

"The Christian Task is clear, to allow the human being to be reborn to a life of freedom and communion," Ela wrote in the book *African Cry*. "The chains of poverty and misery, disease and ignorance that keep this human being prostrate in the dust life-long, must fall."

Christians in the global North should let Ela's words from *African Cry* guide us toward new action. Identifying with the person injured on the side of the road should call us to fight for their liberation from the forces that forced them to the roadside in the first place.

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Matt Bernico is a labor activist and writes on topics pertaining to religion, social justice, and worker activism. You can hear more from Matt on his weekly podcast, *The Magnificast*.

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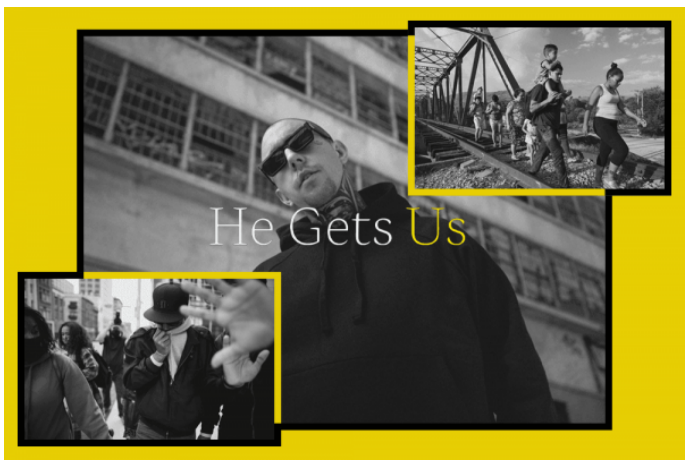

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