

## **Adventures in Faith: Helping People Out of Slavery**

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### **Introduction**

Good morning United Parish! I've been so enjoying our virtual services. But definitely missing seeing all of you in person. I'm thankful for this opportunity to connect with you by YouTube.

As many of you know, I'm a lawyer. I focus on technology cases – specifically, patent infringement cases.

I promise – that's not the reason that Kent asked me to speak with everyone this morning!

Kent asked me to share with you some of the volunteer legal work that has become a strong passion for me. And an adventure in my faith.

### **My Initial Interest in Trafficking – IJM**

What I'm about to talk about is difficult. It may be hard to hear. But it's been an education to me.

My eyes were first opened to the immense problem of human trafficking by a law school friend, Gary Haugen. After we graduated, Gary founded an organization called the International Justice Mission. Over the last 20 years, what started as a small mission now has 900 people working across the globe to disrupt the slave trade. They work with local governments to rescue victims and to prosecute their oppressors.

Here are a just a few of the lives that the International Justice Mission has saved over the last year.

A 12-year old girl named Kim from Phillipines who was trafficked by one of her neighbors. Kim came from a poor family struggling to make ends meet. Her neighbor promised to put her in school and to give her a good job if she moved with him to Manila. Instead, he turned her life into a nightmare for the next three years.

A 10-year old boy from southern India named Vignesh. His mother died and his father was struggling to care for 5 children. He made the difficult choice of sending Vignesh to work at a goat farm for an advance payment of \$530. Vignesh spent the next 2 years enslaved on that farm. He was alone most of the time, never sent to school, was fed weak rice gruel, and slept with the goats.

Are these isolated cases? Unusual cases?

If you multiple these two examples by *thousands* – that’s how many people the International Justice Mission has freed from human trafficking. This one organization has now freed more than **49,000** people from slavery across the globe.

And if you multiply these two examples by *millions* – that’s how many people are still enslaved across the world. It’s a terrible number to think about.

Organizations working in this space estimate that there more than **40 million** people currently enslaved across the globe. And at least 1 in 4 are children.

Where are these people?

They’re young girls in brothels in Southeast Asia and Central America.

They’re young boys on fishing board in Thailand and Ghana. One recent study concluded that close to half of the migrant fisherman in Thailand have been trafficked.

They’re entire families forced to work in brick factories and rock quarries in India.

They’re widowed mothers in Africa whose homes have been stolen from them.

### **Trafficking in Our Country**

And they are right here in our own country.

I’ve learned over the course of my work as a lawyer that trafficking isn’t just a problem in other countries. It is an immense problem in our own country. And even in our own city.

Here are some more truly awful statistics from an organization called Polaris. They run a national human trafficking hotline. And they publish statistics on the number of calls they receive each year.

In 2019, the last reported year, they worked on more than 11,000 cases of reported trafficking. These cases involved more than 22,000 individual trafficking victims. More than 4,300 reported traffickers. And more than 1,900 suspicious businesses. <https://polarisproject.org/2019-us-national-human-trafficking-hotline-statistics/>

And Polaris estimates that these numbers are likely only a fraction of the actual problem.

All right here in our own country.

You may have seen the headlines out of Georgia from just two weeks ago. In one day, 39 *children* freed from sex traffickers in Atlanta and Macon, Georgia, and nine adults arrested.

Polaris keeps a map of the locations of the trafficking cases it becomes involved in across the United States. <https://polarisproject.org/2019-us-national-human-trafficking-hotline-statistics/>

If you look at this map closely, you'll see another shocking fact. Our own city of Boston, Massachusetts is not immune. We're right there in the red zone.

### **My Work in Trafficking**

I'd like to tell you about two women that I've worked with who found themselves in this world.

#### **Eunice Wangari**

My first client was an amazing young Kenyan woman named Eunice. Her story started in an all too common way. She was approached by a family friend and offered what she was told was a great job opportunity. A Saudi Arabian diplomat and his family were in need of domestic help including house cleaning and childcare. She agreed to take the job and began working for them in Saudi Arabia. And when he was appointed to the Saudi Arabian embassy in Washington D.C., she moved with the family there.

Here is the ugly truth about what was happening in that family's home in our nation's capital. Eunice was being held hostage. The family took her passport. They took her means of escape. They made her work 14 hours a day for no pay. She wasn't even given her own room. She had to sleep on the floor in the children's room.

And it turns out she wasn't alone. My firm ultimately represented a series of woman all in the same situation. Trafficked into our country by foreign diplomats. Slipping through without the security protocols like Customs checks that might otherwise catch things like this.

Eunice ultimately escaped in a pretty amazing way. Through a social network that sometimes gets a bad rap – Facebook. After a few months, the family returned her phone, and she connected with a Facebook group for one of her favorite radio stations in Kenya. She came into contact with another Kenyan from the city she grew up in who was living in D.C. He learned what had happened to her, showed up at her door, and helped her escape. And my colleagues and I helped her to recover financial compensation for the unpaid labor and abuse she suffered during the time she was held captive.

### **Lisa Ricchio**

My second client was another incredibly brave woman named Lisa. Lisa grew up one state over in Maine. She met a man who she thought was her boyfriend at a tough time in her life. She had some significant medical problems as a young teenager leading to an addiction to opioid pain medications. She was in the process of overcoming that addiction when she met this man. She had just completed a program that she hoped would help her take back her life. But he tried to take all of that away from her.

He called her from Seekonk Massachusetts and told her that he had just been diagnosed with cancer. He asked her to come see him. She threw aside everything and did exactly that. And that's when her nightmare began. He held her hostage for multiple days. He beat her, he abused her, he did terrible things to her. He withheld food and forced fed her drugs and alcohol. And after four days, he told her that she was going to go to work for him. And she was going to do whatever he told her to do with his male customers.

Lisa escaped a few days later. It took every bit of energy and courage she had, but she got away. She ultimately brought criminal charges, leading to his conviction and imprisonment.

My colleagues and I subsequently helped Lisa with a lawsuit against the motel where she was held captive. Lisa felt strongly that the couple running the motel knew what was happening and that they let it happen. Our case went to trial in December. Lisa got on the stand, she told her story to a full courtroom, and she was believed. Along the way that courtroom, our case made some important law,

including a decision by former Supreme Court Justice Souter, confirming that motels can be held accountable when they turn a blind eye to what is happening. Our case was the first trafficking case against a motel, and following that decision, many more have been filed across the country. It is my hope – and I know it’s Lisa’s hope – that these cases will make a positive change.

### **Rahab and What I’ve Learned.**

So what have I learned? And how has this impacted my faith? There are two thoughts I’d like to share with you. And the first of these starts in the Old Testament.

Kent offered to try to help me find some passages from the Bible for this homily. I’m guessing he thought I might need some help finding Biblical guidance for my legal work in the world of trafficking.

But it turns out that I already had come across what I think is a perfect passage. One that underscores an important truth I’ve learned over the last several years. I found it right there in our middle school Sunday school curriculum last fall.

As many of you know, I’ve been co-teaching our middle school class for the last several years. One of our lessons this fall told the Old Testament story of Rahab. The same passage that my daughter Kate read a few minutes ago. [Joshua 2:1-16]

Joshua tells us that Rahab was a prostitute in the land of Jericho. She lived on the outskirts of the city and would have almost certainly have been viewed as someone who was an outcast. Someone who was not clean. But she is considered one of the heroes in the Old Testament. When Joshua’s soldiers were outside the city of Jericho, and he needed help, he sent his two spies to find Rahab. She gave them a place to stay and helped them into the city. And when Jericho’s soldiers came looking for them, she bravely hid them.

Rahab started her life as a prostitute. But as Kent reminded me, she ultimately became one in a long line of lineage to Jesus. You’ll see her name right there in first chapter of Matthew (Matthew 1:5). She ultimately married Salmon, and bore a son named Boaz, who became a many times over great grandfather to Joseph.

So how does this story about Rahab reaffirm what I’ve learned? As I explained to my middle schoolers when we talked about Rahab, Joshua was clear that Rahab wasn’t a bad person. She was an outcast. She was unclean. But that didn’t make her a bad person. Instead, Rahab was almost certainly a victim of her circumstances, most likely poverty. The same is true today, more than two

thousand years later. So many of the young women who find themselves in similar situations to Rahab got there the same way – they are victims. Victims of bad boyfriends, broken homes, poverty, and drug addictions.

There is an awful lot of blaming of women who find themselves on street corners in Worcester. Or motels like the one that my client Lisa was taken to. There's a lot of blaming. And there's even some glamorizing. All of us children of the 80s will remember Julia Roberts' *Pretty Woman* and Dolly Parton's *Best Little House in Texas*.

But here's the real truth. So many of the women trapped in this world are victims. The story is almost always the same. A man comes along and pretends to be her boyfriend. Offers to help her out of a bad situation. Then he turns on her.

As I said, my client Lisa mustered up some incredible strength. She managed to escape from the clutches of a life-long pimp before he put her to work. She was brave enough to get away. Brave enough to testify about what happened to her in two trials. Brave enough to fight for an important legal precedent to hold motels accountable.

But there are so many women and girls across the globe that aren't so lucky. They aren't able to get away from their traffickers. They are trapped in truly hopeless, soul-ravaging situations.

Which brings me to the second learning. And it's right there in the passage that my son David read a few minutes ago. That God wants us to do what we can to help right these wrongs. He wants us to seek justice for all of the oppressed. Including women like Rahab and Lisa caught in this terrible soul-ravaging world of trafficking.

### **What You Can Do**

One thing I love about the United Parish is that so many of you are doing justice in so many different ways. From treating patients with COVID or opioid addiction. To fighting for our environment. And against systematic incarceration. You continue to amaze and inspire me.

I wanted to close with a few thoughts for any of you interested in this fight for justice for victims like Eunice and Lisa. What can you do?

***First***, you can pray. I started this homily by telling you about the International Justice Mission. They are a faith-based organization, and believe strongly that the work of justice begins with prayer. They ask their supporters for prayers, and they sponsor a prayer gathering every year in support of the work they are doing and the people they are freeing.

I'm a strong believer in prayer too. As I've said to David and Kate, I've found that prayer is an important way to stay connected to God. And it is an important way to stay connected to the world around us. When we pray for others, our eyes stay open to the great needs in our world. And our heart stays open to the ways in which we can help do God's work.

***Second***, if you are able, you can support one of the organizations that are doing so much to fight trafficking in our country and across the globe. I mentioned two that are doing amazing work – the International Justice Mission and Polaris. There's another terrific organization right here in Boston called My Life My Choice. They focus on preventing young girls from becoming victims of trafficking, and supporting those who are survivors. A number of you already have already supported them through our Christmas Fair.

***Finally***, there's one more thing I'd encourage all of you to do. You can keep your eyes open for trafficking victims. As I mentioned when I began, human trafficking isn't just a problem in third world countries. It's happening right here. It's happening in homes like the one Eunice was held captive in. It's happening in motels like the one Lisa was taken to. And it's happening in businesses that try to take advantage of immigrants.

So if you see something that doesn't look right, it probably isn't. I think a lot about that fellow Kenyan immigrant who showed up at a Saudi diplomats' door to save Eunice. He saw something that he knew wasn't right, and he helped. If you see something, you can call your local authorities. Or you can call the Polaris hotline. They make it their mission to try to find help for every reported case of trafficking.

## **Conclusion**

In closing, I'm grateful for IJM, Polaris, and My Life My Choice for great work they are doing. I am incredibly grateful to my clients Eunice and Lisa, for trusting me with their cases. And I am grateful to all of you at the United Parish, who continue to inspire me to what do what I can to be a positive force for change in the world.

I am looking so forward to the time when we can be together again.

## **Ways to respond to today's homily**

*Check out these organizations if you'd like to be a part of the solution.*

### **International Justice Mission (IJM) — [ijm.org](http://ijm.org)**

Cindy has been a strong supporter of IJM for more than 20 years, and is continually astounded by all of the great work they do to confront the immensity of the problem.

### **Polaris — [polarisproject.org](http://polarisproject.org)**

Polaris runs a national human trafficking hotline, maintains a dataset to increase awareness and educates about how human trafficking really works.

### **My Life My Choice — [mylifemychoice.org](http://mylifemychoice.org)**

A terrific organization that began right here in Boston and now operates in 33 states. They focus on preventing young girls from becoming victims of trafficking, and supporting those who are survivors by pairing them with survivor mentors. They do amazing work and change lives.