

**“Choking in the Weeds”**  
**Proverbs 24:30-34**

“I went by the field of a lazy man, and by the vineyard of the man devoid of understanding; And there it was, all overgrown with thorns; Its surface was covered with nettles; it’s stone wall was broken down. When I saw it, I considered it well. I looked on it and received instruction: A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest. So shall your poverty come like a prowler and your need like an armed man.”  
– Prov. 24:30-34

To Bernie Gonzales, Rachel Meyers, all of my brothers and sisters in the struggle for justice here in Waukesha, Wisconsin good morning! On behalf of central staff and the board of directors of the Gamaliel Network, I am delighted to be here with you this morning.

*This is a story about four people named Everybody, Somebody, Anybody, and Nobody. There was an important job to be done and Everybody was sure that Somebody would do it. Anybody could have done it, but Nobody did it. Somebody got angry about this, because it was Everybody's job. Everybody thought Anybody could do it, but Nobody realized that Everybody wouldn't do it. It ended up that Everybody blamed Somebody when Nobody did what Anybody could have done.*

I cannot think of a better time to be here and a better time to be organizing. The best thing in my opinion that could have happened to the field of community justice organizing projects was the election of Donald Trump as the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. If you were like me you sat up as late as you could on the election night, feeling in your gut things didn’t look good, went to sleep and woke up to a nightmare. None of the well-known political pundits gave Trump a chance. In the minds of many, the only stiff competition Hillary Clinton received and would continue to receive along the campaign trail came from Bernie Sanders. When Trump received the Republican nomination, many

thought it was a joke and a sure indication the Republican party was in disarray. But low and behold, the joke was on the Democratic party.

A couple of years ago, I spent a few days in Detroit at the Race and Power Summit, the once booming metropolis now bankrupt. While there, as I drove through parts of the city one could not help but notice the degree of abandonment, the heavy blight in some of the neighborhoods. Vacant lots and abandoned homes and abandoned businesses. But what struck me most was seeing the abandoned churches. It was a heart wrenching visual. Last year I traveled to Flint, Michigan, a city that once claimed over 300,000 people on its rolls now slightly over 99,000, and it too in some areas was an uninhabited wasteland. If one took the time to imagine you could visualize children playing in the streets and sidewalks, cars parked along the curb, manicured lawns, flowers accenting the landscape – just the obvious sign of life. But now, life is a memory and death is more the state of the day and the claim on the future. One must ask how can a city like Detroit go bankrupt and how can a city like Flint, or any city for that matter expose its residents to a neurotoxin like lead that has deadly consequences in seniors and causes mental disorders in children. What led to the economic downturn in Detroit and Flint, was the influx of foreign competition in the auto industry and the downsizing and closing of GM facilities. In Pittsburgh, it was the foreign steel that crippled our mills. Good paying living wage jobs began to be replaced by jobs offering substandard wages, manufacturing was replaced with the service sector. The eventual result is blighted and abandoned communities or neighborhoods of concentrated poverty. We should also not be fooled into thinking that race isn't also a factor in this. The federal department of Housing and Urban Development actually track what is actually called the RCAP or

Racialized Concentrated Areas of Poverty. The weeds taking over our communities are only symbolic of a much larger attitude of intentional neglect and depravity. My point is, these conditions would not be found in the more upscale neighborhoods because those conditions wouldn't be tolerated. But unfortunately, this is normative in our poor communities, communities made up of mostly African-American and other people of color. Communities of concentrated poverty are linked to poor schools, low wages and high crime. These are the conditions that produce rampant homicides, drug sale and use, and where the footers are laid for the school to prison pipeline. I'm not sure you're following me so I'll present what I'm saying in a different way. I would say there is a choking condition; there is an asphyxiation taking place, a suffocation or denial of the necessities for adequate survival. Are you getting the picture now? I'm not so sure. So, journey with me to my past for just a minute. When I was a little boy, my grandmother had a vegetable garden and she would plant every year. It had tomatoes, pole beans, squash, collards, kale, and strawberries. I loved the garden, well, I loved looking at it. Once everything sprouted it was a beautiful sight. But it didn't just happen. The ground had to be prepared. Did I tell you I was a kid? Well, in this corner was my bicycle. In that corner was the wheel barrel, the spade, the pick, the hoe, the pitchfork, and the claw. In this corner was my bicycle; in that corner was the wheel barrel, the spade, the pick... I don't think you get it. Before I could ride my bicycle, I had to... But in order to have a garden with good product, we had to first prepare the ground. However, even after everything began coming through, I realized the work was not done. There was something else I had to do. The bicycle, the basketball, the baseball, bat and glove had to wait until I – picked the weeds. When I would get lazy and half do the job, my

grandmother would say to me, “I don’t want these plants choking in the weeds.” Any weed pickers in the house this morning. If we did not do the necessary maintenance in the garden, all of the hard work of tilling, planting, mounding and fertilizing would be for naught because the garden would be taken over by the – weeds.

The text in the 24<sup>th</sup> chapter of the book of Proverbs is not about flowerbeds or vegetable gardens, but it’s about life. It’s specifically about laziness, complacency, apathy and cowardice. Let me read the proverb again in a more modern but faithful translation, Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*. Listen intently as I read it.

*One day I walked by the field of an old lazybones, and then passed the vineyard of a lout (or someone uncouth); they were overgrown with weeds, thick with thistles, all the fences broken down. I took a long look and pondered what I saw; the fields preached me a sermon and I listened: “A nap here, a nap there, a day off here, a day off there, sit back, take it easy—do you know what comes next? Just this: You can look forward to a dirt-poor life, with poverty as your permanent houseguest!” – The Message*

In the language of this proverb we see a field and we see a vineyard both overgrown with weeds and thickets because one that should have cared for it instead got lazy and basically slept. The writer places himself as the observer of this decaying situation as he listens to a sermon preached to him by none other than the field itself and concludes that this decay is a sign of poverty which resulted from long-term neglect. I’m just here to tell you that the vineyard and fields today are our neighborhoods and communities. I say to you this morning that they have been preaching to us, as the proverb says, a sermon. Unfortunately, many of us have not been listening. This wall that is in disrepair represents the fact that all protections are gone and that our communities have become vulnerable. They have become compromised and exposed. As the proverb

reminds us, this consistent attitude of neglect in the end leads to ultimate poverty! Let me bring this scripture a little closer to home for a moment?

We are the victims of suffocating and discriminatory policies and legislation as well as misguided philanthropy. Foundations present one public motive but are driven by another subversive one. We can talk the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Waltons, the Broad Foundation, the Koch Brothers and others that are behind dismantling public education. You should also know that these philanthropists and corporate contributors fund an organization called the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) that have crafted and pushed legislation to be implemented in state governments, across this country, such as voter id laws, “parent trigger laws,” laws that enable parents to organize themselves and force a school board to close a school, and others. ALEC and their supporters have promoted the proliferation of charter schools, vouchers and the building of prisons with taxpayer dollars. Normally when I talk about charter schools there is always someone in the audience who gets defensive because either they teach in a charter school, started a charter school or have sent their child to a charter school. Let me be perfectly clear. Charter school and voucher legislation was crafted to stir the sympathetic longings of individual rights and personal choice. It’s a nefarious tactic used to promote individual freedoms. Rather than focus on what is best for our kids, we instead focus on what’s best for my kid. But the truth of the matter is this legislation was and is designed to unravel teachers’ unions. These unions have been under attack like every other union in this country and with it, the unraveling of the middle class. What makes you think that Donald Trump wants to save public education? He didn’t attend public schools and neither did any of his children. Why do you think he would bring in Betsy DeVos to head

up the Department of Education? Education in the state of Michigan where DeVos is from is terrible under the explosion of charters. The same is true in post-Katrina New Orleans. Herein is my analogy. If your house has a serious leak in your kitchen how many of you, by show of hands would ignore the leak and instead build a new addition on your house? I didn't think so. How many of you would spend your money fixing the leak in the kitchen? That in essence is what's happening in education. Rather than take the time to investigate and invest in the traditional public schools we create alternatives using the same pot of money and overall, education scholars note that there has not been an improvement in overall public education with the advancement of charter schools. Meanwhile, our children are still "*choking in the weeds.*"

I invite you to read up on the Supreme Court case of *Friedrichs v. California Teachers Association*. The Supreme Court was about to entertain this case and the wind draft was in favor of Rebecca Friedrichs, a conservative teacher in California. This case was a challenge to the requirement that teachers be forced to pay union dues on the basis of teachers who object to the union agenda. This case was first heard in the lower courts but with a shrewd strategy was intentionally lost, forcing the appellate route all the way to the Supreme Court where they knew the Conservative majority would rule in their favor. But then the unexpected happened. Justice Scalia died the the Court ended in a 4-4 tie on the ruling shocking the nefarious plan. But I just heard the other day that the conservative right is trying again and with Justice Gorsuch on the bench who knows what the outcome will be. If The conservatives win, it will in essence effect how every labor union in the country recruits and collects union dues thereby weakening their power base.

Let's talk about immigration. For a couple of decades now there has been the hypertensive discussions about illegal immigrants, code word, the brown people. Words like amnesty had been linked to illegals creating a narrative that our country is being overrun by lawless people from Mexico and Latin American countries who pose a threat to our economy and safety. But what's being ignored is that this country was built on exploitation. Through either short-term memory loss, revisionist history, or just down right ignorance, we choose to forget about the Bracero program but we'll champion "Rosie the Riveter." Nothing against Rosie, but while she was in the factories during World War II, we open the immigration gates and recruited Mexicans all over the country to work in our fields, as farmers also were sent into battle. These immigrants lived and worked under deplorable conditions but they needed the money and we knew it. When we were through with them we kicked them out of the country. When the southwest was demolished by the hurricanes and tropical storms Hugo and Katrina, we used cheap Mexican labor to rebuild the homes in many areas. They were illegal when we needed their labor obviously. We have a tendency to exploit. Donald Trump, however, is now having to examine immigration through a different lens now as he pushes his America First agenda because what is now being discovered is there are a number of companies recruiting and immigrating foreign workers through the H1B visa program rather than hiring American college graduates. What hopefully will be discovered is that there may be more undocumented people in this country that are little lighter in skin tone. Either way, we cannot let our foot off the gas in defending families regardless of their immigration status. The White House has threatened to withhold federal funds from cities that do not comply with Immigration and Customs Enforcement. I say, we call their bluff.

In 2005 after the Sensenbrenner bill was passed in the House of Representatives, there was concern that the Senate would pass a similar version. But Gamaliel and Center for Community Change organized about 5,000 people from California to Pennsylvania who protested on the Capitol lawn in Washington D.C. About 100 clergy and other leaders processed to the Dirksen Building where the Senate Judiciary committee was meeting to discuss their bill. Our goal was to pressure them into not letting it come out of committee. Our message was we would rather break the laws of man than the law of God. The result? The bill never left committee. So, I say again, let them challenge our sanctuary cities because in the end if God be for us, who can be against us?

When it comes to jobs and the economy, people are also *Choking in the Weeds!* Low wage jobs have become the soup du jour while corporate CEOs are paid millions to manage shareholder equity. Did you know that in 1965 the average worker made \$7.52 an hour? Today, the average worker makes \$7.39 an hour. Comparatively, CEOs make on average \$1,566 an hour. But just let me be frank for a moment. This wage problem we are facing in this country began as a race problem and it still is a race problem. For almost 300 years this country's original sin has been rooted in race discrimination evident in economics and space. Dr. Willie James Jennings, of Yale Divinity School said, "if you control the land you control life." The places we can or cannot live is about race and Sunday at 11:00 is still the most segregated hour in the week. So, race has always been a problem. It just so happens that the dragnet of poverty wages has begun to suck in more White Americans while all along we have been the long-targeted population. What is also happening is drugs use is becoming an epidemic because of the heroin overdoses of whites but when the government dropped crack cocaine in our neighborhoods it became a

crime. I invite you to spend time with Michelle Alexander and her book, *The New Jim Crow*, or Douglas Blackmon and his book, *Slavery by Another Name*.

But again, how did we get here? How has this happened? Well, this is how it happened. As a community, *our fields and vineyards have become overgrown with weeds, thick with thistles, and the walls and fences are broken down. The economy, the education and criminal justice systems have preached a sermon to us saying, "A nap here, a nap there, a day off here, a day off there, [we] sat back, and took it easy—and now we are not facing a dirt-poor life, with poverty as [our] permanent houseguest" and most of us are now choking in the weeds!* But the question can also be asked, why has this happened? You see, my friends, because we (and now I'm going to get specific) the faith community, the people of God, the pastors, preachers, potentates, and pew members have sat back, and expected things to be done for us, laid back and watched things go on around us, our children and families are *Chocking in the weeds* and poverty has become our "permanent houseguest!" Where was the faith community when neighborhoods were being gentrified? Where was the faith community when the policies and legislation that shipped jobs overseas led to plant closings and layoffs? Where was the faith community when drugs were intentionally planted in the Black community and prison sentences unjustly restructured? Where was the faith community when immigrants were being profiled, arrested and deported, thereby breaking up families? The faith community is that lazy man; the faith community is the lout or the one with no common sense; we are that person that has lost heart and it's because of us that the people in our communities are "*choking in the weeds?*" We have laid back, drank, napped, and have taken things for granted. We have built congregations where either people who rely on public

transportation can't attend or we build them in their communities where they don't feel welcome. Many of us won't join in solidarity. That's why we suffer from the 4-D syndrome, Disenfranchisement, Disillusionment, Division and Destruction. But I think it's a little more than that too. I think that the faith community, itself, is choking in the weeds. God has given us the power to move mountains. We are called to speak truth to power, to confront the nobles and rulers that exploit the poor and disenfranchised and to challenge and dismantle systems of injustice. But we have abdicated our responsibility and authority. Preachers go to conferences and pass out their business cards hoping to get access to the national circuit of preaching revivals. They become self-appointed Bishops; they get reality TV shows like the Preachers in LA and Detroit. Mega-church preachers capture huge followings with their motivational speeches veiled as sermons. These sermons have only served to fuel their fortune than to challenge policies or policy makers. We have gotten lazy, we have gotten complacent and we have lost heart. We have become ineffective out in our communities because we have become too focused on trying to build our own legacies and monuments. Meanwhile people are choking in the weeds!

We're ineffective in our communities because we're also ineffective in our houses of worship. We have become routine in our practice, we have become sluggish in our praise and we have become wanting in our worship. We show up to church when we feel like it and stay home when we don't. Our walls are in ruin and so we just let anything and everything come into the churches, get planted, rooted, take over and try to run it like a business. We've got weeds growing up all around us in our sanctuaries to the point where I believe even God is choking. Our Sunday schools are weak, our Bible studies are

flat, our preaching is pandering, our music is entertaining and nobody is working out their salvation. We have dead faith because we have no works. If we're not exhibiting our works in the church, how in the world are we going to exhibit them outside the church? Therefore, our churches have become powerless and ineffective. There is no healing taking place, there is no deliverance in our churches and God will not show up where He's got to fight through the weeds. This is not the time and place for grandstanding; this is not the time place for autocracies. People are hurting and it's not the pastor's agenda that matters; it's not the Bishops' or Priests' agendas that matters; it's not the Deacons' agenda that matters. It's God's agenda that matters. And God said, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." This is the time and place where we bear ourselves before the God, roll up our sleeves, get ugly and fight for justice. If our communities are going to get right, then we have to get right. If our families are going to get right, then we have to get right. If our city is going to get right, then we have to get right. Our schools are not going to improve on their own, we have to make it happen. Our kids are not going to wake up all of a sudden and discover values. We have to teach them. Politicians are not going to all of a sudden do what's best for their us. We have to make them. And if they won't hear us, we also have the power to vote them out. We got excited in 2008 when Barack Obama was the Democratic nominee. But we fell asleep in 2010. We got a little excited again in 2012. We re-elected Barack but lost the House and he was stuck working with a dysfunctional Congress. In 2014, we took a nap. In 2016, we went into a coma and woke up to a nightmare. But if 2017 is going to be different, the faith community has to rise up! But, we got our wakeup call in this last election and so as I said in the beginning, I can't think of a better time to

organize! We have the power to transform our communities and transform our cities but one pastor can't do it alone; one church can't do it alone! We've got to organize ourselves for battle. Waukesha needs SOPHIA. My question for you is are you ready to answer the call? Are you ready for the battle? Are you ready to organize people and organize money? Do you want power? You have power! Do you want to use your power? Then stand up! Stand up! Power concedes nothing without a demand! So if we don't get what we want, SHUT IT DOWN!

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