

Richard B. Cook 1972–1983

The Solace of the Scriptures

It was a good idea to offer room and board and \$5 a week. People who come for \$5 a week know you are going to ask a lot of them. On the boycott in St. Louis from 1973 to 1978, we asked a lot.

Sharon went to jail for refusing to stop picketing in front of a grocery store. No grapes. No lettuce. No Gallo wine. When the Salvation Army matron came to her cell to read some scripture, Sharon asked that James 5:1-6 be read to her. Aloud, in the jail, as a comfort. The Salvation Army matron declined. Instead, she moved on to the next woman in the next cell to read comforting scripture to her.

The sister with blessed tendencies toward hypochondria went to jail, too. She insisted on her special diet, which, if not allowed, might bring on unknown but certainly mortal consequences. The sheriffs had to order out.

For the farmworkers, a cloud of \$5-a-week witnesses and volunteers went to the picket lines and to the jails in St. Louis. Joel went to jail. Kathy went to jail. Michael. James. Karen. Philip. Virginia. Ludger. Barbara. Another Michael, and another. Another Joel. Clara. Another Kathy. Susie, Tom. Julie. Kim. Gene. Judy. Sherry. Ed. Midge. Gerald. Mo. Ron. Maureen. Jeanie. Patrick. Dan, Mary Beth. Dolly. Carl. Another Julie, another Ron. Sister Alice Eugene. Sister Ann. Sister Mary Ann, Sister Elizabeth. Sister Loretto, Teka. Dorothy. Wally. Another Kathy. Another Judy. Father Rich. Father Ed. Father John. Father Roland. Father Bill, who went to jail at least three times.

“What are you in for, Father?” “Picketing. How about you?” “Murder, but I don't want to talk about it.” Barbara was breastfeeding when she went to jail. She was not supposed to get arrested that night, but the police officer was hitting on Kim. What about month-old Benjamin at the 3 a.m. feeding? Luckily, Barbara was out by 5 a.m., on her own recognizance.

When we were not in jail, we were talking. Standing in front of the grocery store, talking to the customers, asking them to help. Do something really simple. Just go to some other store. Matthew, six years old, could not understand how anyone could walk past him. “Why do they go in after I ask them not to?” Somebody gave him a quarter and walked in to shop. He said, “I don't want a quarter. I want you to go to another store.” I said keep the quarter anyway.

Sometimes, the police in the little municipalities in St. Louis County wanted to stop the picketing but they did not want to arrest us. They would haul us away from the stores and then let us go. We demanded to be booked, but the cops dragged us out of the police station, locked their doors, and went home. We went back to the stores, which finally took

the Gallo off the shelves.

Once, on my own recognizance, I had a meeting in East Saint Louis, Illinois, with a couple of grocery store executives. At their request, the meeting was after dark, in their executive offices down by the railroad tracks. I made my pitch: No grapes. No lettuce. No Gallo wine. The executives bantered a little bit, laughed out loud at something or other. They said they would get back to me if we would just hold off for a few weeks. The entire chain closed within a month.

We wanted a meeting with Pet, Inc., which had just bought the biggest liquor store chain in town, but Pet, Inc. was avoiding us. What to do? In the days before security guards, go to Pet. Inc.'s headquarters and take the elevator to the top floor. There they all are, peering around the corner. The secretary had to speak for Pet, Inc., but if you are willing to wait all day, good things can happen. The Gallo came off the shelves—for a time.

Cesar came to town every once in a while and we would have a big rally and meet with "Labor." We met with Cardinal Carberry once, too. Cesar, his bodyguards, and I knelt and kissed the Cardinal's ring, as Monsignor. Shockley whispered, "It is social justice." It was, too.

Five dollars a week cannot be a forever thing. Not in the U.S.A. But the Thursday evening Eucharist at the Boycott House, the 8 a.m. staff meetings every day, the focused organizing, the little victories, and the path all this puts you on make up a life with memories of good people, few regrets, and the solace of the scriptures, notably James 5:1-6.

"Now listen you rich people.

Weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you.

Your wealth has rotted and moths have eaten your clothes.

Your gold and silver are corroded.

Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire.

You have hoarded wealth in the last days.

Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you.

The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty.

You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence.

You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter.

You have condemned and murdered innocent people who were not opposing you."

