



February 6, 2019

STEINBECK'S LESSON ON SIN

There's an important teaching about sin in John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. The Joad family has traveled from Oklahoma, where they lost their farm, and arrived in California, where there is not enough work for all of the hopeful migrants. This scene takes place in a camp where many of the displaced families are living while looking for work.

A young woman, pregnant with her first child, talks to a self-righteous Christian who says that the camp is crawling with sinners, though clearly it is not—the people in the camp are honest and kind to one another. But this woman is focused on the “sinful” dances on Saturday nights. They aren't just square dancing, she says, they're grab and hug dancing. As a warning, she tells the young woman about two other pregnant women in the camp who lost their babies because of this sin of dancing.

A few moments later, the camp manager walks over to comfort the scared young mother. He tells her that it is true about the two women, but it wasn't any sin of theirs that caused it. They suffered from malnutrition. It is the sin of the situation, he tells her. It's the sin of poverty and the systemic forces that make life hard on the vulnerable.

Centuries ago, the prophet Isaiah made much the same point. He said that God is not so much interested in our religious ceremonies as in our attention to the well-being of the poor. Let's be clear: suffering is not God's punishment on us; it is often the result of the sin in a situation.

God does not cause suffering. God is at work in our lives to change the situation.

Peace,

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