



ECONOMIC JUSTICE SUNDAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, April 10, 2011

Anthony B. Pinn, Lectionary Team Commentator

Lection - Psalm 140:12 (New Revised Common Version)

(v. 12) I know that the LORD maintains the cause of the needy, and executes justice for the poor.

When Will We Be Paid (For the Work We've Done)?

**When will we be paid for the work we've done?
When will we be paid for the work we've done?**

We have worked this country from shore to shore

**Our women cooked all your food and washed all your clothes
We picked all your cotton and laid the railroad steel
Worked our hands to the bone at your lumber mill. I say...
When will we be paid for the work we've done?
When will we be paid for the work we've done?**

**We fought in your wars in every land
To keep this country free, y'all, for women, children and men
But any time we ask for pay or a loan
That's when everything seems to turn out wrong
We been beat up, called names, shot down and stoned
Every time we do right, someone say we're wrong
When will we be paid for the work we've done?
When will we be paid for the work we've done?**

**We have given our sweat, and all our tears
We stumbled through this life for more than 300 years
We've been separated from the language we knew,
Stripped of our culture, people you know it's true. Tell me now...
When will we be paid for the work we've done?
When will we be paid for the work we've done?**

**(When will we be paid for the work we've done?
When will we be paid for the work we've done?)**

**Will we ever be proud of "My country, 'tis of thee"?
Will we ever sing out loud, "Sweet land of Liberty"?
Will we ever have peace and harmony?
When will we be paid for the work we've done?
When will we be paid for the work we've done?"¹**

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

This song, "When Will We Be Paid (For the Work We've Done)?" by The Staples Singers, sums up a common current refrain around the world and by African Americans in America even in 2011.

From the period of slavery to the present, African American life has been defined in part through the struggle for greater degrees of full citizenship and the rights, responsibilities, and opportunities associated with citizenship. While there have been political, social, and cultural dimensions to this struggle, there have also been efforts to advance the economic standing of African Americans. Reconstruction and the Civil Rights Movement are prominent examples of the effort to secure justice that would have positive impact on the quality of life for African Americans by removing barriers to jobs, proper housing, education, and the other structures of collective life that allow a people to establish themselves economically and secure a promising future.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Psalm 140:12

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Clearly, gains have been made as reflected in the successes of the black middle class—executives of major corporations, political leaders, successful business owners, and so on. Yet, life within far too much of the African American community continues to be marked by poverty. College campuses remain closed to too many, and prison is the “classroom” for far too many African American males.

The disparity between the economic condition of white Americans and African Americans is staggering. For example, the poverty rate for African Americans was three times that of whites in the late 1970s: 3 out of 10 African Americans existed below the poverty line whereas only 1 out of 10 white Americans did. Roughly 20 years later, in 1995, the median income for an African American family was less than 61 percent that for the median white American family. The recent economic downturn within the United States has further troubled the financial health of citizens of the United States in general, and African Americans in particular. For African Americans, hardship in the United States involves a dangerous blend of race and class, whereby there remain troubling connections between one’s racial background and one’s economic well-being. This situation, as bad as it is for African American males, is even more intense for African American women, who experience life as a connection between race, class, and gender. All this points to the ongoing need for economic justice as a major thrust of religious commitment.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Economic Justice Sunday provides an opportunity to reflect on the financial need that grips African American communities. It is a chance to re-commit to helping those who suffering from discrimination and who go through life with limited resources. Psalm 140:12 points to divine commitment to the poor, but the burning question of the hour is this: How committed to economic justice are those who claim a relationship with God? On this Sunday, and in this way, the religiously devout gain a moment to reconnect with the demands of the faith, consistent with the ministry of Christ:

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn...²

With a renewed commitment to the needs of those who are suffering most, those who claim a commitment to moral and ethical living in line with the best of the Christian tradition can gain perspective and more energetic resolve to make a difference. This means thinking beyond prosperity theology and instead involves a commitment to fundamental change in ways that improve in a consistent and sustainable way the quality of life as experienced by many African Americans. Suggested here is not a simple critique of the worst dimensions of material acquisition or consumerism; rather, it is a call to make use of the church resources and the best of its ethical principles to push for economic justice.

From the level of economic injustice in our community and around the world, it appears that those who claim to be sons and daughters of God are content with the LORD taking care of the cause of the needy and executing justice for the poor. Perplexingly, less than 50 years after so many died and fought in the modern Civil Rights Movement, it appears to have been lost on us that they did it for the poor, they did it for justice, and they did it because it's what the Bible requires. Yes, they knew that God was on their side, but at no time did they act as if God would do for them what they could do for themselves.

It appears that the strong winds of lethargy, unconcern, and fear have overwhelmed us when it comes to the fight for economic justice. Lethargy has made too many who have overcome economic obstacles lazy and or only willing to get involved when there are no costs to us. Unconcern seems to be an acceptable posture. After all, there is so much in our daily lives to claim our attention; we are fatigued by all of the causes that clamor for our attention. But the likely beast that is feeding our lethargy and unconcern is fear. We fear that we will fail if we start or join a movement. We fear that the personal costs will be too high for us, perhaps even costing us a well-paying job. We fear that there really is not much we can do against global economic forces that are controlled by a handful of men around the world.

But fear is the polar opposite of faith! If the Bible is true, "God executes justice for the poor." God's commitment has not changed since the days in which Psalm 140 was written. That means that we only need to step up for service in a battle led by God.

Challenge

God is still omnipotent. God can still do anything but fail. God still makes provisions for those who stand for God's causes. A song says, "If I am right, he'll fight my battles for me." We began this unit with The Staples Singers asking, "When will we be paid for the work we've done?" The answer is: When we demand justice of those who have gained from our labor.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this text include:

Sights: Poor people living on the ground; people with limited clothing in cold weather; children who are malnourished due to a lack of food; depressed men and women who are unemployed; the decadent homes, clothes, and toys of the rich;

Sounds: The cries of hungry children; the unrest of the poor as they demand economic justice; the moans of senior citizens who are without food and shelter; and

Colors: Pale faces; green money; yellow gold; and black oil.

III. Other Material That Clergy and Others Can Use

We All Can Do Good

Our lives, we are told, are but fleeting at best,
Like roses they fade and decay;
Then let us do good while the present is ours,
Be useful as long as we stay.

Refrain

Do good unto others, do good while we can,
Our moments how quickly they fly;
Remember the proverb, remember it now,
We all can do good if we try.

A look or a smile, that in kindness we give,
May comfort a desolate heart;
May sweeten a life that is lonely and sad,
And hope to the weary impart.

Refrain

How many around us are strangers to God,
How many poor children we see;
If such we could bring to the foot of the cross,
How grateful and glad we should be.

Refrain

We all can do good, and we all can bestow
Some gift for the sake of the Lord;
If only a cup of cold water we give,
Our souls will not lose their reward.

Refrain

When³

Video Presentations

- “End of Poverty” (Cinema Libre, 2010)
- “Waging a Living” (Docurama, 2006)
- “Frontline: Two Nations of Black America” (PBS, 2008)
- “Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years 1954–1965” (PBS, 2010)

Images

- Gordon Parks “American Gothic”—Online location:
<http://pdngallery.com/legends/parks/mainframeset.shtml> accessed 8 January 2011
- Gordon Parks, “The Fontanelle Family”—Online location
<http://pdngallery.com/legends/parks/mainframeset2.shtml> accessed 8 January 2011
- “Poor People’s Campaign” Stock Gallery—Online location:
http://johnphillipsphotography.com/Poor_People_Gallery/index.html accessed 8 January 2011

Books

- Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American Women and Religion. Bettye Collier-Thomas. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010.
- Something Within: Religion in African-American Political Activism. Fredrick C. Harris. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Righteous Riches: The Word of Faith Movement in Contemporary African American Religion. Milmon F. Harrison. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Name It and Claim It? Prosperity Preaching in the Black Church. Stephanie Y. Mitchem. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2007.
- Long March Ahead: African American Churches and Public Policy in Post-Civil Rights America. R. Drew Smith. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004.
- Rising from the Rails: Pullman Porters and the Making of the Black Middle Class. Larry Tye. New York, NY: Holt Paperbacks, 2005.

Notes

1. “When Will We Be Paid (For the Work We’ve Done)?” By The Staples Singers. We’ll Get Over. Memphis, TN: Stax Records, 1994.
2. Isaiah 61:1-2, NIV.
3. “We Can All Do Good.” Online location: [http://www.music-lyrics-gospel.com/gospel music lyrics/we all can do good 397.asp](http://www.music-lyrics-gospel.com/gospel_music_lyrics/we_all_can_do_good_397.asp)