



ANTI-INCARCERATION/SOCIAL JUSTICE SUNDAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, July 21, 2013

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Lection – Hebrews 13:3 (New Revised Standard Version)

Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

The Anti-Incarceration movement was heightened after the uprising at the Attica State prison (NY) of 1971. The prisoners were revolting against the deplorable conditions they were forced to live in. They wanted those on the outside to understand that in addition to inadequate dietary options and overcrowding, they were being warehoused without programmatic activities designed to foster successful re-entry into society and diminish recidivism. The primary objection to these decisions was the inequality of the prison population. Black and brown persons were sentenced to longer terms than their white counterparts for equal or “lesser” drug offenses especially after implementation of the Rockefeller mandatory sentencing of 1973. In *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander says, “Human Rights Watch reported in 2000 that, in seven states, African Americans constitute 80–90 percent of all drug offenders sent to prison. In at least 15 states, blacks are admitted to prison on drug charges at a rate from twenty to fifty-seven times greater than that of white men.”¹

The observance of an Anti-Incarceration/Social Justice day serves to highlight that slavery by any other name is still slavery. We do indeed serve a God who draws to the center of a salvific relationship those whom society has pushed to the periphery, having declared them unworthy of love, forgiveness, and prayers. We can raise our voices as one and through the power of the Holy Ghost demand an end to the injustices wrought upon our loved ones.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Hebrews 13:3

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

As we examine various conversations surrounding “social justice” and “incarceration” we find both are intrinsically held conversations utilized in controlling a people and community. The term “social justice” was spoken in 1840 by a Sicilian priest, Luigi Taparelli d’ Azeglio, and was expanded by John Stuart Mill in 1863: “Society should treat all equally well who have deserved equally well of it, that is, who have *deserved* equally well absolutely.”² Who decides who is “deserving” and if the “deserving” individual “deserved” equally well? By whose definition is “equally well” defined?

George McDonald, a Republican candidate vying to become mayor of New York City, declared during a forum, “The mass incarceration of African American men may have made us safer, but it leaves us with generation after generation of broken families that are uneducated that have multiple barriers to employment.”³ McDonald is the founder of the DOE Fund, a “non-profit” organization based in New York providing “community” jobs, education, and counseling to men who are homeless, released from prison, and/or struggling with addiction. Many of our youth/young adults in the urban setting are victimized by the cycle of dysfunction becoming trapped, hopeless, bitter, resentful, and dangerous, which unfortunately breathes life into George McDonald’s observation.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The book of Hebrews was written just prior to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in C.E. 70. It is thought that if the book were written after that date the incident would have been discussed. The authorship of Hebrews has been in dispute for centuries. It has been ascribed to Paul, Barnabas, Apollos, or some un-named Hellenistic Jew because of the language and style. However, the emerging theme of promise and fulfillment lends itself to that of a Jewish Christian. Theologically the book’s emphasis is a “high Christology” in that whatever argument you can offer, Christ is still superior. There are twenty plus citations and in excess of seventy allusions in the Old Testament interpreted in “midrashic” form, which suggests an earnest attempt to prove the connection between an Old Testament hermeneutic and Christ.

The epistle moves in a melodic movement to present the case for the “Superiority of Christ” in an organized outline. The prologue lays the foundation by declaring the Superiority of God’s New Revelation (1:1-4). It continues with Christ being superior to angels (1:5–2:18), Christ being superior to Moses (3:1–4:13), and Christ being superior to the Aaronic priests (4:14–7:28); the superior sacrificial work of our High Priest (8:1–10:18); a call to follow Jesus faithfully and with perseverance (10:19–12:29); and the conclusion (chapter 13).

The epistle was written to probably second-generation Jewish converts familiar with the Old Testament and yet having heard the sermons based upon the New Testament. It is also thought that those who led them to Christ were now dead and the converts were floundering in faith. Some, perhaps many, of them had previously suffered persecution because of their relationship to Christ in the form of public insult, imprisonment, and confiscation of property. This had stopped short of martyrdom, at least for the specific house church addressed. This was some time earlier and their courage in the face of a renewed threat and pressure to return to Judaism or Judaize the Gospel was lacking, hence the writer’s exhortation to persevere (10:35-39).

Our assigned text is found within the concluding chapter 13 and sub-headed “A Call to Ethical Living.” The chapter begins with a call to continue loving one another (verse 1: “Keep on loving each other as brothers”). The writer was encouraging the community to love one another despite disagreements regarding worship or the law. The community had to know that love must be the foundation of all relationships that profess Christ as Lord. Throughout the New Testament Christ repeatedly admonishes us to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:37-40) and to love one another as Christ has loved us (John 13:34-35), and we are told to develop a love that is greater than faith and hope (1 Corinthians 13) and that love is from God (1 John 4:7-8).

Verse 2 is a call to remember and be hospitable to any and all strangers in their midst (“Do not forget to entertain strangers ...”). It isn’t understood who these strangers are or where they are from. However, those unknown to this community have no certain place, and they were encouraged to remember that they too may find themselves in the same situation. Certainly they would want someone to take them into their home and heart, and the community must remember to do the same for others. When we are open to receiving strangers in our midst we can find ourselves entertaining angels as did Abraham (Genesis 18) and Lot (Genesis 19). Christ states in Matthew 25:35b, “I was a stranger and you invited me in.”

In verse 3 a call is again issued to the community to remember. Remember those who are in prison. Imprisonment then as now suggests an alienation from all that is familiar, comforting, and encouraging. The alienation from family and community does not encourage positive reconnection. Families are fractured and irretrievably broken. The influence of parents on children is lost because society brands the previously incarcerated as “undesirable.” When on parole, they are trading one incarcerated state for another. The restrictions are a tortured form of incarceration in and of itself. There is freedom—but not quite; the previously incarcerated are accepted into community—but not quite; they are so near—and yet so far. Someone still says when to come and when to go . . . what time to check into residence, when to report to the parole officer, etc. Previously incarcerated individuals are unable to take their place in society as “whole” members with the same privileges we take for granted—the right to vote, to obtain a driver’s license, and to secure meaningful employment that would allow them to support a family and regain their dignity. They are too often branded and remain outcasts in society and in community. Unfortunately these restrictions send subliminal messaging to return to the “street life,” for in the “life,” in the “swag,” one is able to regain that sense of self; “street cred” is regained because you are now “somebody on the real.” Families are “encouraged” to deny their existence through silence. If they are too vocal about their loved one, they too will be viewed with a jaundiced eye, so yes, we are indeed incarcerated with them.

The alienation and disconnection probably prompted Christ to indicate in Matthew 25:36c, 40: “I was in prison and you came to visit me . . . the King will reply, I will tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”

The concept of “torture” is probably more psychological than physical especially in the 21st-century criminal justice system. Being placed in solitary confinement is torture; languishing in a confined environment devoid of mental or emotional stimulation is torture; living day after day, week after week, month after month, and year after year without educational opportunities or learning any type of marketable skills is torture; or being taught a skill that you know will benefit

someone else financially while you are paid far less than minimum wage, and when you are “freed” you can’t use that skill to provide for your family is torture. However, again, it’s torturous for the family as well, as they see and live the frustration of their loved one and are unable to relieve the pressure building within or between them.

Challenge

We as the people of God cannot celebrate the pain of our brothers and sisters because Christ exhorts us to remember and share in their struggle. We must come together and lift our voices as one strong, loud, clear voice to elected officials to reform the criminal justice system. No doubt, for every action, there is a reaction and for every decision there is a consequence. However, in the midst of our mistakes and missteps, Christ forgives us and affords us a second chance, and we must do the same for our sisters and brothers. We cannot allow the prison industry to continue to flourish on the backs of our loved ones. We cannot continue to allow communities to flourish as new prisons are built to warehouse our children, turning them into “societal animals and outcasts.” We must remember that the Church has always been the voice of freedom. Remember, during the civil rights fight, the Church fought. Remember, during the voter registration fight, the Church fought. It is time for the Church to remember, and rise, and fight again to reclaim the lives of our sons, daughters, husbands, wives, and communities.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sights: Dark, dank buildings warehousing humanity as they languish as animals waiting to be led to slaughter;

Sounds: The anguish of frustration screaming in one’s heart and mind, afraid of the consequences of being heard by those in authority; the tortured sound of silence; and

Emotions: Gaining resolve, thinking, meditating, and moving from what is to what we know is possible with God.

III. Resources for Exploration

- Alexander, Michelle. [The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness](#). New York, NY: The New Press, 2012.
- Woodson, Carter G., and Willie Lynch. [The Mis-Education of the Negro and The Willie Lynch Letter](#). USA: Feather Trail Press, 2009.
- www.socialjustice.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/index.php/Prison_Moratorium_Project
- www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/gilmoreprisonslavery.html
- www.firstthings.com/article/2007/01/definig-social-justice-29

Notes

1. Alexander, Michelle. The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness. New York, NY: The New Press, 2012, 98.
2. www.firstthings.com/article/2007/01/defining-social-justice-29.
3. To watch video footage of George McDonald's response, click on the following link:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TnTPeYsgaXE&feature=player_embedded
(CapitalNewYork.com).