



DISABILITY AWARENESS LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, April 3, 2011

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Lecton – Exodus 4:10-11 and Luke 14:12-14 (New Revised Standard Version)

Exodus 4:10-11

(v. 10) But Moses said to the LORD, ‘O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.’

(v. 11) Then the LORD said to him, ‘Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?’

Luke 14:12-14

(v. 12) He said also to the one who had invited him, ‘When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. (v. 13) But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. (v. 14) And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.’

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

The National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM) effort to educate the American public about issues related to disability and employment began in 1945. Congress enacted a law declaring the first week in October each year “National Employ the Physically Handicapped Week.” In 1962, the word “physically” was removed to acknowledge the employment needs and contributions of individuals with all types of disabilities. In 1988, Congress expanded the week to a month and changed the name to “National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM).”

That each October is designated National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM) by Congress shows that at least the government in some way recognizes that the country needs to be made more aware of the plight of the disabled when it comes to employment. Additionally, there are government programs to assist the disabled with housing, education, and even getting their taxes done at no cost if they meet the economic guidelines.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Exodus 4:10-11 and Luke 14:12-14

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

In 2009 President Obama announced that his Administration is taking several steps to ensure that there is fair and equal access to employment for all Americans, particularly the 54 million people in this country living with disabilities.

My Administration is committed to ensuring that all Americans have the chance to fulfill their potential and contribute to our nation. Across this country, millions of people with disabilities are working or want to work, and they should have access to the support and services they need to succeed. As the nation’s largest employer, the Federal Government and its contractors can lead the way by implementing effective employment policies and practices that increase opportunities and help workers achieve their full potential. We must also rededicate ourselves to fostering an inclusive work culture that welcomes the skills and talents of all qualified employees. That’s why I’ve asked the responsible agencies to develop new plans and policies to help increase employment across America for people with disabilities.¹

Unfortunately, the Church does not seem to have gotten the message about the plight of the disabled. Other than vans with lifts and sidewalks that accommodate wheelchairs, my experience and that of my friends who are disabled are that few churches have ministries to help or even to accommodate the disabled. When black churches hold employment fairs, single's programs, exercise classes, etc., most are not disabled friendly. When people are sought to give leadership to major church initiatives—Stewardship Sunday, the Building Fund Campaign, Church Anniversary, Women's Day, Men's Day, etc.—the disabled are rarely called upon. One has to wonder if the Church has ever read Exodus 4:11: "Then the LORD said to him, 'Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?'" or Luke 14:13-14: "But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Before I became disabled, I traveled around the country from one denominational event to another and from one church to another signing in choirs, working with missions, working with youth, you name it. I have no memory of any efforts, special or otherwise, that were ever made to accommodate disabled persons other than a few ramps and wheelchairs being made available in some situations. In other words, the historic treatment of the disabled in the black church as I have known it for 50 plus years seems to indicate that the church does not get the import of these two Scriptures and either blames the disabled for their condition or just is too busy to care. But we all need to know that the same God who created persons who are mute, deaf, blind, without arms, without feet, developmentally challenged, or disabled in some other way is watching how they are treated. Not only that, the Son of God indicated that a reward is given for those who are hospitable to the disabled.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Many of us have read the story of the call of Moses. In Exodus 4 Moses holds a conversation with God and God chooses him as the liberator of the Children of Israel. However, this was not what Moses had in mind for his life. He was fine and minding his own business and trying to live a basically uneventful life. The conversation in our text is **after** the burning (not consumed) bush episode, and Moses should know that God is serious and will not let up. But given Moses' staunch unwillingness to go, God turns Moses' staff into a snake and then back into a staff. God makes Moses' hand leprous and then heals it and even tells him that he will turn water into blood before the people to make them believe that God had sent Moses. But even after all of these miraculous signs by God, Moses still is not interested in the job! So, in his last ditch effort to get God to get another liberator, he tells God that he is "slow of speech and slow of tongue." Who can be a great liberator if he or she can't even make a stirring speech? That's quite a disability in the role in which God was thrusting him.

The words of a preacher who imagined God's response to Moses come to mind: "So what. You still have to go and since I made you and know all about you. I'll know what you need, and can provide it, every time you step out on faith in me." But God really made it plainer than that preacher did. God said, "Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?" In other words, who made your mouth, vocal cords, and everything

else that makes you you? But God does relent a bit to this reason given by Moses and lets Aaron serve as Moses' spokesperson, temporarily.

It was not until I was asked to write this commentary that I had ever read or heard anyone preach about the fact that the Bible says God made people with speech difficulties and made folk mute, deaf, or blind—in other words, disabled. Nor had I ever heard anyone preach specifically about the disabled categories named in Luke 14:12-14. I am sure there are many reasons that neither of these texts is regularly raised in the Church with a focus on the disabled. Just as we avoid talking about sex in the Church, we avoid talking about the disabled. We can't quite figure out what is the right thing to say to the disabled. We're not sure what we can do to help *them*. They make us uncomfortable, especially the developmentally and emotionally disabled. So just as we do with sex, we choose the "ignore the subject and move on" strategy. But just as this hasn't worked in helping lessen unintended pregnancies, neither is ignoring the disabled working to help assimilate them into the wider culture in meaningful ways, and it is certainly not working for God in light of what we read in Luke 14:12-14.

In Luke 14, God (this time through Jesus) again brings up the subject of the disabled. Jesus is having dinner on the Sabbath at the home of one of the leaders of the Pharisees and uses the occasion to give what in its simplest description is advice on dinner conduct. However, since we are told that this is a parable, we know that these verses concern something much more important than dinner manners. This is a parable, which means that Jesus is referencing Kingdom behavior and the attitude needed by those who would share in his Kingdom. Some scholars have suggested that the second part of this conversation—verses 11-14 (which contain our text)—are not parabolic, but instead are just appended to the first part of the text because of the parallelism of the pair of sayings. Maybe; maybe not. But the words in verses 11-14, which are clearly aimed at the host (but which no doubt gave all in attendance something to think about), concerning whom to invite to a dinner party, also concern Kingdom-like behavior.

Jesus names four groups who are well off and who can return the favor if invited to a fancy dinner, and pairs them with four groups who could never return the invite. He says if you are having a dinner party, "invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind." Those who openly receive this last group will be rewarded by the ultimate host, "The Lord of Hosts," if you please, at the resurrection! In other words, when we single out the disabled and poor and invite them to events and occasions where they are never invited, that's Kingdom behavior. When we invite the disabled to lead, to join, to do so much that God has enabled them to do (perhaps with gracious assistance from us), that's Kingdom behavior. When we treat the disabled with dignity, as people of worth, as God's creation worthy of our hospitality, that's Kingdom behavior. In fact, when we read texts and can see in them those on the margins and bring them into our circles of concern, that's Kingdom behavior.

Celebration

We are all created by God, marvelously and wonderfully made. And, yes, God made some blind, some deaf, and some mute, but God doesn't make junk and God doesn't make mistakes. So, I choose to celebrate all of God's handiwork. I choose to believe that God can select people with disabilities to do the amazing. I choose hospitality for the disabled because God has been

hospitable to me. I choose to praise God right now for every future Kingdom citizen who does for the disabled and helps them do for themselves and lets a reward from God be all the payment that is necessary.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of these passages include:

Exodus 4:10-11

Sounds: Moses talking to God with slow speech; God talking;

Sights: Moses' opposing posture while speaking to God; a person who is deaf and a person who is blind; and

Luke 14:12-14

Sounds: The sound of clanging forks, spoons, knives, and glasses; the chatter of dinner guests;

Sights: Wealthy guests at a banquet; the poor, crippled, lame, and blind at a dinner gathering given by the wealthy; the resurrection of the righteous; and

Smells: The aroma of bread; a variety of meats, vegetables, and deserts.

III. Suggestions to Make the Day Memorable and Effective

- This Sunday be sure to place images throughout your church of disabled people in a variety of postures, i.e., at work, play, as parents, Church leaders, etc.
- Visit the Department of Labor Disability Awareness web page to find great images that you can use. Online location: www.dol.gov/odep/programs/ndeam2010.htm
- See today's cultural resources material for additional resources for the disabled.
- Use this worship service to create a Disability Awareness and Capacity Building Committee in your church. Make sure that a great deal of thoughtful planning has gone into the establishing of the committee and their first-year goals, and ensure that they have proper funding to meet their goals. Also, be sure to include disabled persons of all ages on the committee.

Note

1. See the federal disabilities website for the policies enacted by the Obama Administration in 2009 and 2010. Online location: www.gov/disabilities accessed 14 January 2011