



DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.'S BIRTHDAY (BELOVED COMMUNITY DAY)

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, January 18, 2009

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Lection - Matthew 25: 34-40 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 34) Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; (v. 35) for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, (v. 36) I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me.” (v. 37) Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? (v. 38) And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? (v. 39) And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” (v. 40) And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Though a cross-section of America honors Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. for his commitment to civil rights and nonviolence, King Day holds a particularly special place in the life of the black church. King was, first and foremost, a Christian minister informed by the social teachings of the black church tradition. Notions of the siblinghood of humanity and the parenthood of a sovereign God who partners with those on the underside of a society constituted King’s moral vision. This strand of the black prophetic tradition impelled King to not only challenge America to live up to its own professed ideals of freedom, justice, and equality for all, but to extend a privileged option for the poor and oppressed.

In the spirit of King's commitment to Christ-like service, rather than taking a day off from school or work, Congress passed the King Holiday and Service Act in 1994 to encourage volunteerism. Many congregations utilize the third Monday in January to participate in and commit to neighborhood service projects with other community organizations in attempts to promote cross-cultural engagement toward realizing King's vision of beloved community. In this regard, the King holiday is "Not a Day Off, but a Day On."

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Matthew 25:34-40

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Forty years after King's assassination, it is hard to ignore the unintended consequences of civil rights victories and the shifting terrain of America's political economy. Increased social mobility of the black middle-class coupled with the demise of nontechnical jobs within America's economy contributes to acute levels of concentrated poverty in many urban areas. This, in turn, has led to the resegregation of public education along race and class lines, and dwindling opportunities for quality education for many American children. Unfortunately, the privatized prison industrial complex, a booming business in its own right, benefits from such harsh social realities. Currently America's prison population is the highest in the world, having surpassed two million, with the majority being black and brown, poor nonviolent offenders. Much of this is due to unjust laws targeting the poor, such as mandatory sentencing for 5 grams of crack cocaine as opposed to 500 grams of powdered cocaine (the drug of choice for the white and wealthy) and draconian prosecutorial privilege similar to those witnessed in Jena, Louisiana.

And even the tangible gains of the African American middle-class are quickly eroding. Racially-targeted sub-prime lending practices in recent years have contributed to a record rate of home foreclosures and depreciating home values. This will contribute to what has been forecast as the greatest loss of African American personal wealth in this nation's history. Couple this with the rising costs of food, other household items, and gas against stagnant and decreasing wages, and you will find that a large number of persons who were supposed to have "made it" are now in need of assistance. Many of those who thought themselves firmly ensconced in the middle-class have awakened to learn that they are but one paycheck away from financial foreclosure.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Matthew 25:31-46 demonstrates Matthew employing apocalyptic discourse about judgment and Christian encouragement. The narrative affirms the paradoxical nature of God's transcendence and immanence as well as Jesus' lordship and lowly status. This theological tension is not to be resolved in the text. Rather, Matthew provides the parable to demonstrate how, in the final days, Jesus will reveal himself as a king who sits in judgment, but also as a comforter who dwells among the least of these. This narrative serves as a source of admonition and encouragement to Christian disciples who wish to

partake in the inevitable eschatological victory of the kingdom of God. To reign with Jesus on high is to abide with Jesus down low.

Stephen G. Ray Jr., the cultural resources commentator for today, was so on target when he wrote “A dimension of the cruciform life that we see displayed in the lives of both Jesus and King, is that it is a life which moves farther and farther to the margins as it unfolds. Jesus begins his ministry in the midst of synagogue, reading the words of the prophet Isaiah (Luke 4:14-20) and proclaiming that the scripture is fulfilled in *their* midst. Yet, as he leaves this seat of importance, his ministry then unfolds in a way that not only brings him into contact with the outcasts (tax collectors and prostitutes) as a healer and teacher, but also as one with them in fellowship—one of the most significant signs of piety in his day. This journey finally brings Jesus to the fellowship of criminals who are rejected by the religious authorities and crucified by the empire (Luke 23:26-49). It is to them (the ridiculed and despised) that he makes his final promise: ‘Today you will be with me in heaven!’”

This is why the text is unequivocally ethical in nature. The parable is not concerned with right belief (orthodoxy) but right action (orthopraxy). This can be seen in the initial decision of the king in verse 34 and by way of his subsequent response to the befuddled believers in verse 40. Action verbs pervade the parable as Jesus sets forth his expectations for the faithful. Nowhere do we hear about a confession of faith or forgiveness of sins. And the theological doctrines of grace, justification, or atonement are not present here. But we do witness Jesus honoring those who demonstrated a love ethic via Christian discipleship.

By love ethic, I am referring to a mode of moral action animated by a principle of love and mercy. Not love in the erotic sense (*eros*) or love that is limited to other members of the Christian faith (*philia*). The ethic of love Jesus prescribes in this parable is disinterested, self-giving care for the “other” (*agape*). We are to act on behalf of those who have human needs and who reside along the social margins (the hungry, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned).

Moreover, we can describe this mode of action as love-based because the parable is quintessentially Christological. Jesus is referred to as the “Son of Man,” (v. 31), a “shepherd,” (v. 31), “king,” (vv. 34, 40), and “Lord” (v. 37). All of these monikers are used throughout the Old and New Testaments to prefigure Christ. Matthew thus appears to distinguish general humanitarianism from merciful actions informed by a distinctly Christian maxim. To be in Christ is to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, embrace the stranger and care for the sick, among other things. One might surmise, then, that the previously mentioned theological doctrines of grace, justification, and atonement do not have to be mentioned overtly because they are inextricably linked to this Christian love ethic. This is to say, it is the acceptance of God’s grace and atoning work that compels us to look beyond ourselves to help those in need just as Christ did for us. Let the Church say, Amen.

This latter point is important because all too often we separate Martin Luther King, Jr.'s love ethic from the Christian faith. Surely King was informed by varying philosophical and religious principles, which included Gandhian *satyagraha* (love force), Hindu and Buddhist *ahimsa* (non-violence), and Henry David Thoreau's theory of civil disobedience. But King's view of Christian salvation was tied to social justice. Christians have been saved (*soterion*) and set apart (*ekklesia*) for a particular purpose which is found in Micah 6:8, "to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God." This is why King adopted the slogan "Redeeming the Soul of America" for his civil rights organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Coalition. King believed that the quest for civil and human rights for all of humanity, particularly the most vulnerable, were integral to the Christian mission and evidence of human redemption.

Celebration

We celebrate a God who chooses to keep company with the least of these. Whenever we find ourselves in need of life's necessities or seemingly pushed to the margins of existence, we need not be ashamed or feel alone. God is there. We can also celebrate what it means to sacrifice oneself for the service of Christ. We do not have to have the ability to "preach like Peter" or "pray like Paul" to be considered co-laborers in the work of God. Rather it is the small, often underappreciated, acts of love and mercy that indicate one's work for God. If we offer that which we may consider to be little (a meal to the hungry, hospitality to the lonely, and kindness to the hurting), God will bless it and consider it as much.

Descriptive Details

Some of the descriptive details in this passage include:

Sounds: The voices of the dispossessed; the sound of steel prison bars clanking as they are slammed shut;

Sights: The image of a king high and lifted up counterbalanced by the same king who reveals himself as a beggar; a homeless person; a convicted criminal behind bars; the gaunt face of a hungry or ill woman; the ashamed faces of the imprisoned; and

Smells: Incense burning around the throne of God; the undesirable smells of homelessness and illness, which may include the odor of urine.

III. Other Suggestions for the Sermonic Moment

Weave lines or images into your sermon from the poem "Inauguration Ball 2009," which is located in the Cultural Resources unit for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Birthday (Beloved Community Sunday).