ECONOMIC JUSTICE SUNDAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

Sunday, April 10, 2011

Ralph Wheeler, Guest Cultural Resource Commentator
Attorney, storyteller, and civil rights activist

I. Introduction

Today we celebrate Economic Justice Sunday. In celebration of that liturgical moment, the Lectionary Scripture focuses our attention on God's allegiance to the causes of the needy and the poor. We are also reminded that, as followers, we have a duty to emulate God—we have a duty to fight oppression, defend righteousness, and demand justice. These are some of the basic tenets of being Christian. There is a role for both the individual and the entire Church, in the liberation struggle for economic justice for the poor and the needy.

Our focus on economic justice is intended to challenge us in our places of comfort and nudge us to explore broader pathways of fairness and equity. The cross sections we encounter will be

viewed through the cultural lenses of history, film, music, poetry, and storytelling. The explorations we take will expose some of the underbelly of racism and greed while speaking to the core values that we ourselves have accepted as our own. Thus, our look at economic justice is two-fold: individual and corporate.

The execution of justice is seldom easy. It is often filled with danger, resistance, and disappointment. On the one hand, it can be awe-inspiring, life-altering, and personally fulfilling. On the other hand, it can be spiritually disabling and mentally challenging, and it can lead to physical death. The quest for justice for the poor and the needy often tests the very mettle of which we are made. It sometimes brings us face-to-face with evil personified—with powerful individuals, oppressive systems, and corrupt institutions that prey upon the vulnerable. At other times, it forces us to view our own demons—what we really think about the poor and the needy.

Those vested with power and resources always fight tenaciously to retain their positions of privilege while keeping the poor and the needy economically, politically, and socially disenfranchised. This vicious cycle has been played out in our nation since the very first slaves arrived in Jamestown, Virginia in the early 1600s. The cycle was continued when the thirteen Original Colonies joined forces to "form a more perfect Union" and the new Nation, the United States of America, that they conceived and birthed was born, half free and half slave.

The cycle continued through and after the Civil War—a war fought by southern states because their leaders could not begin to contemplate the complete loss of the free labor provided by the slave system. It also continued when southern legislators, towns, and states adopted and enforced Jim Crow laws and other discriminatory practices to contain, control, and suppress the ex-slaves. And, the cycle continues today with mass incarceration of young black men, causing some to argue that the same racial caste that existed in Jamestown remains in effect today.

At the least, these facts should cause us to ask what is still needed for economic justice to truly be enjoyed by African Americans.

II. Definitions and Etymology

"Economic Justice" taken literally means "fairness in the way people are treated."[1] It also means just or fair practices and treatment in the activities of trade, industry, employment, and money. From a socio-economic standpoint, this is a global or trans-cultural concept. Its true meaning does not turn on governmental affiliation, social standing, or geographic location. In addition, the terms are not founded on the notion of charity. Instead, they are rooted in the obligatory concepts of what is "due" and what is "owed." In contrast, "charity" is rooted in the notions of perceived need and love.

The word "justice" has Old French roots, with an original usage suggesting "righteousness and equity."[2] The word came into English usage around the twelfth century. The companion word "economic" is related to the science of Economics. Thus, "Economic Justice," as a concept, has implications for the individual and the social constructs and systems by which and in which the individual operates. As we explore economic justice through the prism of our recent past, we will be guided by these concepts and definitions.

FREEDOM RIDES MOVIE: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d8CAKAXR

III. The 1961 Freedom Rides*

Significantly, this year Economic Justice Sunday on our liturgical calendar (although your church can celebrate it at any time in the year) falls very close to the 50th anniversary of one of the most pivotal moments of the American Civil Rights Movement—the 1961 Freedom Rides. That pivotal moment, similar to other pivotal moments of that era (e.g., the Brown v. Board of Education decision in 1954; the start of the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955, led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and organized by the Montgomery Improvement Association; the murder of Emmett Till in 1956; the birth and spread of white Citizen Councils; passage and signing of the Civil Rights Act in 1960, authorizing federal supervision of local voter registrars; the assassination of Medgar Evers, Mississippi NAACP Field Secretary, in 1963; the founding of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in 1964; the murders of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner in 1964; the signing of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, making illegal all actions designed to prevent African Americans from registering and voting, etc.) helped to shine a floodlight on the barbaric practices of American apartheid.

It was a time when southern blacks, northern students (black and white), and good-hearted men and women of every age and background came together. They risked their lives to break the chains of an evil caste system that subjected millions of blacks to severe poverty, mis-education, and a second-class citizenship status that gave them little protection from constant tyranny—all because of their color. Also, our liberation struggles for equal economic opportunity, voting rights, and full citizenship were embraced by some black churches and black institutions of every characteristic and denomination. It was a time of courage and great chance taking.

Now that almost 50 years have passed since that first group of Freedom Riders boarded buses in Washington, D.C. to go south to act on the tenets of their beliefs and faith—to assist their brothers and sisters in obtaining economic, social, and political justice (full citizenship)—it is appropriate that we use this golden anniversary of that event to explore the full meanings of Economic Justice. In doing so, we can use this liturgical moment, Economic Justice Sunday, to educate our young about our recent past and our continuing struggle to retain what was gained. It also affords us a new opportunity to offer strategies for the battles ahead.

IV. The Historical Legacies: A Contextual Framework

In 1961, at the time the Freedom Riders started their heroic trek across the American South to strike a blow against the South's entrenched form of racial apartheid (segregation), I was 13 years old and was living in the belly of the beast—Mississippi. Southern segregation was more than an informal system of separation of the races. It was a cruel, institutionalized web of policies that were created and maintained to ensure white domination. Those policies and practices were deeply rooted in the nation's inhuman past.

Segregation and all of its vicious tentacles can be traced directly back to the very foundations of our nation. The policies grew out of a constitutional framework and a set of colonial worst practices (mainly the practice of enslaving others to get their labor free) that had helped our nation thrive economically. Every American Colony had at one time or another authorized and permitted the system of slavery to exist and grow within its boundaries.

Even the American Declaration of Independence, when it was approved by the Colonists, gave an approving wink and nod to slavery, because the document was totally silent on the practice of slavery. Subsequently, the nation's Constitution was approved with language authorizing and directing that slaves be counted as "three fifths" of a state's population, for the purposes of direct taxation and determining the apportionment of representatives for the several states in the Federal House of Representatives.

The policies of segregation and white domination were formally enshrined in the Black Codes,[3] Jim Crow laws and regulations, state constitutions, city charters, and other legislative enactments. Over the years, they also were upheld and respected by both State and Federal courts. Segregation was so endemic to the American South, it was often referred to by southerners as: "Our way of life." For years, the fate of Presidential candidates turned on whether they vowed to support the oppressive system of segregation. Most did.

To ensure the continued existence of this "way of life," each individual was expected to abide by the rules and regulations that were put in place to ensure white domination of American blacks. When that did not happen, violence and ostracism were employed.

Black Americans lived in constant fear. Any white person could violate their rights, savagely beat them, take their property, or take their life and there would be no redress of grievances. No punishment would flow to the offenders. It was their "way of life." Also, we were relegated to the lowest forms of employment. It was an economic, political, and social caste system. And, we were at the bottom. Economic Justice was not a part of the equation in "our way of life."

The Freedom Riders came to help us defeat this entrenched system of economic and political disenfranchisement. When our help came, we were encouraged. Our spirits were revived, for we could feel freedom in the air. Justice was near. Hope had not abandoned us. We marched, we prayed, we sang:

Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born. Let a bloody peace be written in the sky… Let the martial songs be written, let the dirge disappear. Let a race of men now rise and take control.[4]

Fifty years later we are struggling to hold on to the gains we made.

V. Economic Justice Organizations

There are numerous organizations, including churches and foundations, that are involved in economic justice work. Churches and organizations needing assistance in establishing or expanding economic justice programs should first identify their area of interest, existing financial and volunteer capacity, and future programmatic needs. They should also survey the geographic area where they intend to perform their work, to determine need and to identify other organizations that may be currently involved in similar work in the geographic area. Collaboration with established groups is advised.

The following is a list of national and regional economic justice organizations that may be helpful in providing information, data, fundraising tips, and substantive assistance. The list is not intended to be all inclusive and The African American Lectionary does not vouch for any of the assistance or recommendations that the entities listed below may provide. We offer this list

merely as a starting point. Hundreds of additional economic justice organizations can be found in local telephone books and on the Internet. Normal due diligence is advised. Also, remember that it is a good idea to begin justice work at home. So, seek out organizations in your community and state that have long-standing good reputations for successful economic justice work.

1. Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice: info@sneej.org
2. The Ella Baker Center for Human Rights: http://www.ellabakercenter.org
3. The National Urban League: http://www.nul.org
4. The National Justice for All Coalition: http://www.njfac.org/

VI. Songs That Speak to the Moment

The song section for Economic Justice Sunday 2011 begins with a song via video by R.L. Burnside titled "Poor Black Mattie."[5] Its verses and style speak of the harsh economic conditions of the poor.
Youtube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c8RtayjqqIw

The next four songs, "Oh Freedom," "I Woke Up This Morning with My Mind Stayed on Freedom," "I'm Gonna Do What the Spirit Says Do, " and "Victory Is Mine," are all long-time Freedom songs. Other than "Oh Freedom," each is a re-arrangement of songs commonly sung in the black church; they were re-arranged for use during the Modern Civil Rights era. Their messages still ring true today.

Oh Freedom
Oh Freedom, Oh Freedom, Oh Freedom over me
And before I'd be a slave
I'll be buried in my grave,
And go home to my Lord and be free.[6]

I Woke Up This Morning with My Mind Stayed on Freedom
I woke this morning with my mind stayed on freedom
I woke this morning with my mind stayed on freedom.
Hallelu, Hallelu, Hallelujah![7]

I'm Gonna Do What the Spirit Says Do
I'm gonna do what the Spirit says do,
I'm gonnna do what the Spirit says do,
What the Spirit says do, O Lord, I'm gonna do what the Spirit says do.
I'm gonna march when the Spirit says march …
I'm gonna vote when the Sprit says vote …
I'm gonna live like the Spirit says live …[8]

Victory Is Mine
Victory is mine. Victory is mine. Victory today is mine.
I told Satan get thee behind. Victory today is mine.

Victory is mine. Victory is mine. Victory today is mine.[9]

VII. Uncle George and Aunt Nina Benson

Here, I am reminded of my Uncle George Benson, my mother's brother, and his wife, Aunt Nina Benson of Jackson, Mississippi. Both are long-time members of Cage Chapel Baptist Church in Jackson. Uncle George turned 102 in February 2010. He is the only one remaining of 10 brothers and sisters—the last uncle my siblings and I have. He is a quiet, strong Mississippi man who does not waste words. He was born in the small, rural town of Terry, Mississippi, but he spent most of his adult life in Jackson, the state capitol.

Until the summer of 2010, Uncle George drove 150 miles (sometimes twice weekly), round trip, to the Mississippi Delta to fish in lakes, rivers, and backwater sloughs of the Mississippi River. Usually he would leave during the early morning hours. It was not until the curtain of night was drawing closed that he would drive his truck, with boat in tow, back into his Jackson driveway. Most times he returned home with a huge cache of brim, white perch and catfish—50 to 100 (that's no fish story). He always shared his catch with neighbors, friends, and family.

As Uncle George began to inch up in age, I and other members of the family frequently needled him about his continuing to take his boat on the water. He always gave a clear, short retort: "I will know when to quit." Then, one day this past summer, without being asked, he announced to me: "Well, I've hung up my fishing poles. I'm not going to take the boat out anymore." I looked at him in disbelief. There was no regret in his eyes, no sorrow in his voice. He was perfectly content with his decision.

Later, as I thought about his decision, I recalled he had told us many times: "I will know when to quit." I also remembered his decision to retire several years earlier, after operating his automobile repair shop for 75 years. He was not sick. He still had clients. And he was still making money. But he closed his shop because he knew "when to quit." Watching and listening to Uncle George over the years has taught me that knowing when to quit and when not to quit is an important skill to have in anyone's life, even when it comes to economic justice work.

Uncle George and Aunt Nina have taught me other valuable lessons about life and economic justice. Aunt Nina owned and operated a beauty parlor that was located on Farish Street, in Jackson. Farish Street was one of the busiest streets of commerce in the city. In addition, several civil rights organizations were located on that Street. And Farish Street was frequently teeming with civil rights workers, including nationally known personalities. We often attended civil rights meetings at some of their offices and the churches in the area. Aunt Nina also was a founding member of the Mississippi chapter of an organization that was created to bargain for fair wages and Social Security benefits for Mississippi household workers.

Once civil rights and economic justice work went into full operation, Uncle George and Aunt Nina opened their home to out-of-state civil rights workers. Their home became a beehive of civil rights activities. They both were strong Movement supporters, and Aunt Nina spent much of her time organizing and volunteering for the Movement.

In March of 1956, the Mississippi Legislature created the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission.[10] The Commission was created in response to the May 1954 United States

Supreme Court decision in Brown v. Board of Education, outlawing segregated public schools. The Commission's primary duties were to spy on civil rights workers and to try to prevent any change in Mississippi's segregated way of life. The Commission's activities did not end until it was abolished in 1977.

The Sovereignty Commission had paid informants, investigators, and spies. Commission staff and informants investigated those who attended or participated in any form of civil rights work. For example, black public school teachers were monitored, meetings were spied upon, and car tag numbers were written down and used to monitor individuals attending Movement meetings. Any individuals determined to be participating in civil rights activities were terminated from their jobs if they worked for a public entity or if they worked for a white employer.

Because of their civil rights activities, Uncle George lost all of his white clients. Whites comprised 35% of his business. Uncle George and Aunt Nina were not deterred. They remained active in the Movement. When asked why they didn't discontinue their civil rights activities after he lost his white clients, Uncle George said: "I knew there was something more important than my paycheck. Our days were almost over (that was 40 years ago and he is still here). We were fighting for you young folk." He also said: "Baby, everything has a price—even freedom."

On another occasion, Uncle George had to stand guard on his front porch, with a cocked automatic rifle, to protect his family and visiting civil rights workers, when members of the Ku Klux Klan began casing his home. That was the same year that James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner were murdered, their bodies buried in an earthen dam near Philadelphia, Mississippi; 43 black churches were fire-bombed throughout the state; and McComb, Mississippi became known as "the bombing capital of the world." At times, we knew no one was on our side, except God.

Now, I know Uncle George was right. Everything has a price—even freedom. And knowing when to quit also includes knowing when not to quit. Both are essential to a reasoned life and both are essential to economic justice work, because that work is never easy.

VIII. Economic Justice Opportunities

The following are but a few suggestions for congregations to engage their memberships and communities in economic justice work. Remember, there are numerous resources in your congregation, city, state, and on the web. All that your church needs is the will.

a. Adopt an historically Black college or university and contribute to its student scholarship fund;
b. Each month, raise an offering for the United Negro College Fund;
c. Conduct a quarterly needs economic census for your congregation and community and meet those needs. Partner with three other churches in this effort;
d. Organize a financial literacy class and teach parishioners and community residents the basics of financial literacy;
e. Create an internship program for high school and college students in your congregation (using qualified supervisors) to assist parishioners and community residents with economic justice issues;
f. Use local and state entities to implement a monthly credit counseling class;

g. Using bankers, real estate agents, city, county, and state officials, develop and implement a home ownership class, with the goal of getting each person in the class into his/her own home in 24 months;
h. Take a group of students to the 50th anniversary of the Freedom Rides in Jackson, Mississippi in late May 2011. Contact the Mississippi Governor's office, as the activities are still being planned;
i. Invite former and current Economic Justice workers to your church's Economic Justice Sunday services. Honor them by introducing them to your congregation.

Conclusion

Economic justice workers are often thought of by many as being too liberal, too radical, and too endowed with a 1960s type spirit. Some think economic justice work should be primarily left to community organizers and liberal foundations, while others think this kind of work is for college students and other young folk with a bent for social work.

However, if we are to emulate God, we all must become economic justice workers. The poor and the needy will be with us always. Thus, we can each find a way, as individuals or as members of a group, to help some poor or needy person obtain what he or she is due, in some area of his/her life.

I can hear the winds of economic justice blowing around the world. Now is the time to strike a blow for economic justice! Do not find yourself on the wrong side of history or on the side that left economic justice work to others. Economic justice is righteous work. It is spiritual work. It is needed work—work that frees each person on both sides of the equation. Sometimes it is successful if it merely lifts the spirits of the oppressed. Often it achieves its purpose, if it just enables the poor-in-spirit to press forth to the next day. It is helpful; if it only provides support for the weary while their hope is rebuilt. Like quilting, it is piece work—building, strengthening, and making whole each step of the way. But, it is work we all can perform.

Happy 50th anniversary, Freedom Riders. Thank you for the work you did.

***** Freedom Riders Movie Trailer, Director Stanley Nelson. Online location: **http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d8CAKAXR** accessed 9 January 2011

Notes

1. "Economic Justice." Online location: http://www.etymonline.com/ accessed 9 January 2011

2. Ibid.

3. Franklin, J.H. and AA Moss. From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005 (1947), pp. 250–251.

4. Alexander, M.W., R. A. Long and E.W. Collier. Afro-American Writings: An Anthology of Prose and Poetry. London, England: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1985, p. 436.

5. “Poor Black Mattie.” By R.L. Burnside. Online location: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c8RtayjqqIw accessed 9 January 2011

6. “Oh Freedom.” Negro Spiritual. African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, Inc., 2001. #545

7. “I Woke Up This Morning with My Mind Stayed on Freedom.” Traditional. Sweet Honey in the Rock. Format: MP3. Freedom Song—Television Soundtrack. New York, NY: Sony/BMG, 2000.

8. “I’m Gonna Do What the Spirit Says Do.” Traditional.

9. “Victory Is Mine.” African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, Inc., 2001. #489

10. The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission. Online location: http://mshistory.k12.ms.us/articles/243/mississippi-sovereignty-commission-an-agency-his accessed 9 January 2011