



ECONOMIC JUSTICE SUNDAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, April 19, 2009

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Lection - Luke 20: 45-47 and Luke 21:1-4 (New Revised Standard Version)

Luke 20: 45-47

(v. 45) In the hearing of all the people he said to the disciples, (v. 46) “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in robes, and love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets. (v. 47) They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

Luke 21: 1-4

(v. 1) He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; (v. 2) he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. (v. 3) He said, “Truly I tell you, this

poor widow has put in more than all of them; (v. 4) for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.”

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

The black church has long been a place where one could hear messages about the need for economic justice. Now, some have even gained enough courage to rightly blame the so-called religious leaders who are perpetuating a Prosperity Gospel that is bankrupting the poor. These religious robbers are even carrying out their schemes during an American economic recession.

The recession hurts the US economy at all levels, but the recession’s most severe impact is upon the black poor. The most vulnerable are single black women, children, widows and seniors. Economic data on unemployment and poverty rates in the black community indicates that a recession in the US economy means an economic depression for the black poor.¹ The current economic crisis prompted huge monetary stimulus packages designed to bailout nearly collapsed financial giants on Wall Street. There has been no similar advance of a government stimulus package to secure employment uplift, education and health care for hurting women and children.

Economic experts tell us that if corporate giants fall we can expect an economic meltdown in the American and global economy as well. Wealth, they tell us, trickles down rather than trickles up. People are upset at the bailouts for Wall Street companies while those who are trapped in what appears to them to be a permanent recession due to lost incomes and homes continue to struggle to survive. The US economic crisis precipitates a spiritual and moral crisis for black churches that we must deal with now. We can no longer wait or defer the issue.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Luke 20:46-47; Luke 21:1-4

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

I know the affects of poverty on the black community. Growing up in West Tennessee, I recall communal alliances and economic cooperatives that were formed to help people survive seasons of hard economic times. The black churches in the community joined with civic clubs and vegetable coops to give people hope. Today, what should the black churches’ prophetic response be to the disturbing economic disparities that prevent empathy and the implementation of compassionate public policy action to alleviate the social ills affecting the poor? While America’s upper middle class are asked to weigh issues such as trade and its effects on wages and jobs, or the complications of providing health care and its effects on the take-home pay and retirement benefits, or the rising costs of college tuition on their children’s future, the black poor are too often given a moral lecture on presumed black pathologies – a lack of interest in education and the skills needed to compete, a weak sense of family, and high criminal proclivities. The research of economists confirm what I know from my Southern roots -- that during hard economic times the crime rate rises and other social pathologies increase in the black

community but also solidarity for uplift and sustainable support increases in families, churches and outreach organizations.²

While the nation celebrates the symbolic breakthrough of having the first African American elected to the presidency of the United States, Barack Obama, the nation faces an unprecedented economic crisis. The crisis calls for nothing less than just social arrangements and for compassionate action in alleviating growing inequalities affecting poor minority groups. Christian spirituality and solidarity with the most vulnerable of our society reminds us that those who are suffering belong to us; their problems are our problems. A compassionate spirituality relevant to the spiritual and material needs of people is the urgent lifeboat the black church can provide in today's crisis.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

In the twentieth chapter of Luke, Jesus warns his disciples about fraudulent religious leaders. He categorically denounces those who want respect and honor, yet harm widows and, to add insult to injury, pray long prayers! Then, in Luke 21, Jesus continues his message by speaking of a widow who gave all she had into the Temple treasury. He further raised the ethical issues related to economic justice that did not characterize the religious motives of the elite scribes and leaders in the synagogue.

As guardians of the Temple, the spotlight of social prominence and power drove their religious commitments more than true compassion for the poor and widows. Jesus warns his disciples against the temptation of manipulating social status to satisfy one's own lust for glamorous spotlights to the neglect of compassion and mercy toward the poor. Essentially, Jesus said to his disciples beware of spotlight seekers whose charitable piety and allegiance to the Temple is but a smoke screen to manipulate and maintain social advantage and control. Interestingly, this was not a message about the general society, it concerned religious leaders.

The religious elites were devouring widow's houses to gain wealth and social prestige. In the public eye, they paraded in long robes as a sign of religious prominence but, behind the scenes, they were the guardians of systems that violated the biblical tradition in Judaism that viewed God as a God of compassion and mercy, especially for the poor and the vulnerable. "For the Lord your God is... the awesome God who does not show partiality... He brings about justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the stranger by giving him food and clothing. Therefore, show your love for the stranger" (Deut. 10:18-19). Because the compassionate ends of justice did not matter to these elite scribes and religious leaders, Jesus strongly condemns them as guardians of a corrupt Temple system. They did not treat the needs of the poor and widows as holy.

In contrast, Jesus praised the widow's giving as a selfless act of devotion to God. The widow gave out of her poverty "all she had to live on" in contrast to the rich who gave out of their abundance. Justice and compassion were not priorities of these who had a lot to give, and they did not give in total devotion to justice and compassionate participation in the lives of others. Jesus' words about the widow's act of giving imply praise for

selfless devotion to God. He also used the occasion of her giving to illustrate that the widow was a victim of a system where justice and compassion to the poor, orphaned and needy did not deeply matter even to those whose job it was to guard the funds that could help those in need.

A poor widow placed her trust in a Temple system that violated and mocked her trust and generosity. It is for this reason that New Testament biblical scholars warn that Jesus' comment about the widow leaves open the question - was Jesus' praise of the widow's generosity more central to the story, or his lament that in giving all she had she had become a victim of the Temple system?³

As was the case in Jesus' time, the poverty of women, widows and children is a stark reality in our society. In black communities, women, widows and children represent an overwhelming percentage of the population who make up the membership of black churches. Giving is an expression of their truest selves and hope for social compassion and justice. They come to contemporary churches as the widow in the story came to the ancient Temple, to give selflessly of themselves in service to the Church. And, by giving a portion of their fixed incomes, they trust that the Church will remain a refuge of compassion and mercy for the destitute and will continue to spread God's Word.

Jesus' strongest prophetic proclamation came as a judgment against certain Temple practices because they were part of a religious system of injustice and oppression. By singling out the widow's selfless devotion to God, Jesus, at the same time, condemned the insidious feigned religious piety of those who used religion as a cover up for their own lust for social prominence and material gain. Let us beware the twenty-first century Temple keepers who continue to take from and beguile the poor and illiterate to line their coffers and increase their power in the world. Jesus condemns them and all who ignore the needs of the poor, widows and orphans.

Challenge

The widow in this story shows spirituality akin to Jesus' life of compassion, mercy and allegiance to the poor. The widow shatters the idea that prosperity is a sign of favor with God. The element of surprise in the story is that the most vulnerable person; the widow withholds nothing in her efforts to give while the religious leaders manipulate religion for personal gain. Today's churches and Christians need to determine who they want to emulate, the self-less widow who gives all she has expecting the Church to be a place of compassion and justice, or those who devour widows' houses while also giving long prayers.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sight: The gifts of the rich people (Luke 21:1) - envision the gifts the wealthy would have brought - fine jewels, precious metals, animals and produce; and

Sound: The clank of the two small coins dropping in the treasury box (Luke 21:2); and hearing the people (Luke 20:45) - imagine sounds from the people - old men coughing, children playing, women and men talking. Perhaps it would resemble the commotion of the church vestibule after Sunday service.

Notes

1. See, Austin, Algernon. "What a Recession Means for Black America." Economic Policy Institute: Research for Broadly Shared Prosperity. EPI Issue Brief # 241, 18 Jan. 2008.
2. See, Spring, William E. "The Economic Crisis in Black and White: Surrounding America's Divides and Expanding Opportunity for All." The American Prospect. 22 Sept. 2008.
3. Culpepper, R. Alan and Gail R. O'Day. The New Interpreter's Bible. The Gospel of Luke, the Gospel of John. Volume IX. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1995. p. 395