



ANTI-INCARCERATION DAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, October 10, 2010

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Lection – Luke 5:27-32 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 27) After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, “Follow me.” (v. 28) And he got up, left everything, and followed him. (v. 29) Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house; and there was a large crowd of tax collectors and others sitting at the table with them. (v. 30) The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” (v. 31) Jesus answered, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; (v. 32) I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Jails and prisons are designed to break human beings, to convert the population into specimens in a zoo - obedient to our keepers, but dangerous to each other.

- Angela Davis

This liturgical moment gives us the opportunity as people of faith to recall and recognize the devastating impact of incarceration on human life and community. In this hour, we are called to worship and witness in a manner that sheds light on the complex and multiplied set of human circumstances that can prod individuals down the tragic path of incarceration.

It must be acknowledged that the caustic pull of poverty, insidious racism, adverse addictions and negative peer influence all can conspire as allies in leading a person to eventual incarceration. While we cannot ignore the deviance of criminal behavior and concur with the need to discourage lawless activities, we must also take exception with public policy and corporate greed that combine to make incarceration a “growth” industry, feeding on the misery and misfortunes of people.

In this moment where we affirm God’s goal of liberation, freedom and responsibility, our worship (which must be a lifestyle) must move us to both advocacy and action. We must be advocates for a public policy that deconstructs the “cradle to prison” pipeline while at the same time acting in our own context to provide substantive options and alternatives to a life plagued by crime and delinquency.

According to the Children’s Defense Fund, one in three African American boys and one in six Latino boys born in 2001 are at risk of imprisonment in their lifetime. While boys are five times more likely to be incarcerated during their lifetime, there are a growing number of girls already in the juvenile justice system, and their numbers are increasing. This tragic trajectory leads to marginalized lives, imprisonment and often premature death. Although the majority of fourth graders cannot read at grade level, states spend about three times as much money per prisoner as per public school student.

We must use our voice, presence, influence and collective political and economic power on behalf of those who struggle at the crossroads of unenviable options. **We must advocate for access to quality early childhood development, nutritional programs and educational services and accessible, comprehensive health and mental health coverage.**

These are seldom budgetary priorities of state and national governments; yet, as representatives of the liberating presence of God, we are called to highlight and promote those initiatives and enterprises that sponsor and support life and life abundant: this is systemic redemption.

However, our advocacy must also extend to the conditions, treatment, rehabilitation and development of those that are currently incarcerated. Victimization and violence in our prisons continues to operate in epidemic proportions while efforts to redevelop and rehabilitate persons that are incarcerated are diminished by funding and training challenges. Our mandate is to shine the spotlight on these conditions and advocate for change.

Tragically, even after a person has served the required sentence and been released, they remain socially stigmatized and economically disadvantaged; factors that function to drive them back into the criminal justice system. Often, they are not even welcome in the church, but are greeted with the same suspicion and skepticism that they have found in the culture. However, it is the ministry of Jesus and those that seek to follow him to communicate through their advocacy and action that there is a healing for the sick, freedom for the oppressed, hope for a thug and heaven for a “g” (a gangster).

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Luke 5:27-32

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

We approach this text in a historical moment where there is an epidemic of incarceration. In the United States today, there are 2.3 million prisoners in our criminal justice system and another 5 million involved in the process either due to probation or parole situations.

The United States contains roughly 5% of the global population, yet we have 25% of the globe’s known prison population. The incarceration rate in the United States is five times higher than the average incarceration rate for the rest of the world.

Our prison population has skyrocketed over the past two decades due largely to shifting federal mandates that resulted in the incarceration of large numbers of the mentally ill, the non-violent and the substance addicted. Mass incarceration of illegal drug users has not curtailed drug usage. The multi-billion dollar illegal narcotics industry remains largely intact.

Incarceration for drug crimes has had a disproportionate impact on minority communities, despite virtually identical levels of substance use across racial and ethnic lines, while post-incarceration re-entry programs are haphazard and often nonexistent, undermining efforts at rehabilitation, family stability and public safety and making it extremely difficult for ex-offenders to become full-fledged, contributing members of society.

The election of the first African American President signaled a time of hopeful euphoria for the marginalized and disadvantaged around the globe; yet, the epidemic continues, spurred by a global recession, soaring unemployment and our simultaneous engagement in two wars that cost us dearly both in terms of lives and resources. As proclaimers, we join our voices with those that call for justice and side unashamedly with the God of scriptures who delivered Joseph *through* a jail, Daniel *despite* jail, and Paul and Silas *out* of jail.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Luke, more than any other gospel writer, highlights the passion Jesus possessed for the desperate, depressed, overlooked and abused persons in society. This text is the second of five controversial encounters where the scribes and Pharisees challenge Jesus and he responds either in word or deed.

In the first scene, Luke 5:17-26, Jesus forgives a lame man his sins. The scribes and the Pharisees challenge his claim to be able to forgive sins, and Jesus responds by demonstrating his authority to forgive sins and heals the lame man.

In the second scene, Luke 5:27-32, Jesus calls the tax collector Levi to be his disciple. A tax collector was a very unlikely person to become a disciple of the Messiah as tax collectors were commonly viewed as consorting with the enemy because they worked for the Roman government. It is also quite clear that many of them collected more than they should have to enrich themselves (Luke 3:12-13). Yet Jesus calls him saying simply, "Follow me," and Levi complies.

Levi was apparently a wealthy man, having the resources to hold "a great banquet for Jesus at his house," including "a large crowd of tax collectors" (Luke 5:29). The same group of Pharisees who had earlier questioned the authority of Jesus to forgive sins (Luke 5:21), now question the propriety of His association with "tax collectors and sinners" (Luke 5:30). Because He ate and drank with them, the Pharisees thought it denoted a level of fellowship and camaraderie inappropriate for one claiming to be the Messiah. Though their complaint was directed to His disciples (see 5:30), Jesus answered them directly with an unquestionable truth shaped like a proverb, saying, "Those who are well have no need of a physician only those who are sick."

This witty retort won the argument, but did not diminish the controversy that swirled around Jesus and his ministry because whatever else he may have been, in Luke's gospel, Jesus is a social-political revolutionary who was generally sympathetic to and, to some extent, associated with the first century Palestinian liberation movement popularly known as "the Zealots" which made it palatable for the Romans to crucify him for insurrection. Luke makes no attempt to make the words or actions of Jesus more tame and compliant, but he bears witness to a problematical Jesus and his difficult ways.

Jesus in Luke's gospel is shocking, demanding and perplexing precisely because he refuses to play by the rules of culture, nor pay silent homage to oppression. Luke's Jesus lives by a different set of rules and swims in a completely different stream. He speaks of the reversal of what is commonly accepted and politely acknowledged. In his paradigm, God reigns, not self interest; people are measured by character, not cash flow, and righteousness is always the rage.

In his model, confession is prized and arrogance is poison; servants wear crowns and beauty has nothing to do with skin. By his standard, everyone was considered rich because grace was the only currency that mattered. This idyllic reality which called him forward into the future may be a source of curiosity for us, but in its dissimilarity, it is also frightening and unfamiliar.

In Luke, Jesus is a jarring, troubling, disturbing presence who cuts against the grain. We cannot come to an understanding of Jesus in Luke comfortably because here he represents a world turned upside down so that it might be turned right side up. What is highly valued among people is detestable in the sight of God.

There are 2 kingdoms locked in an inverse relationship with one another, such that what is *important* for one is *useless* in the other; what is *reasonable* in one is *foolishness* in the other;

what is *effective* in one is *disastrous* in the other. Our world's *light* is the Kingdom of God's *night*: *up* here is *down* there and that is why Jesus in Luke seems so alien and radical.

Luke tells us of a counterintuitive Jesus; one who defines himself as the champion of the poor, the prisoners, the blind and the oppressed. One who chooses tax-collectors and fishermen to be his disciples. One who offends the powerful and defends the weak. One who always sides with the underdog and seldom takes the expected positions on the religious questions of the day. This asymmetrical Jesus tells stories; he does not deliver exegetical homilies. He serves and commends to others a life of humility and suffering. He predicts his death on the cross and goes to Calvary with eyes wide open.

Luke writes to a community of Christians living under oppression during the Roman regime who desperately wanted less challenge, less sacrifice and less commitment; who wanted to chip the hard edges off Jesus and mute his confrontational message, so that they could assimilate into the dominant culture. Luke's Jesus makes no attempt to accommodate those sensibilities, but confronts, counters and challenges the "way of the world" and we are invited not to fix him, but to follow him.

Celebration

We celebrate the reality that Jesus places a priority on people and is willing to breach protocol and ignore norms for the sake of reclaiming and redeeming those that have been rejected, giving them the power to follow him.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sights: Levi in a tax booth; people in the marketplace; people engaging in commerce; Levi leaving his tax booth; Levi and a large group of tax collectors at a table with Jesus; the Pharisees and Scribes watching Jesus and others dine;

Sounds: Crowd noise, conversations, complaints, noise at the banquet at Levi's house; the sounds of clanging spoons and forks and glassware; the Pharisees and Scribes complaining about the company Jesus is keeping;

Textures: The texture of the food; the wooden table; and

Mood: Busy, recreational, tense, and confrontational.

III. Other Sermonic Comments

There is an aspect of Jesus that chills even a disciple's heart to its depth and makes his entire spiritual life gasp for air. This unusual person is walking with great determination ahead of me, and He strikes terror right through me. He no longer seems to be my Counselor and Friend and

has a point of view about which I know nothing. All I can do is stand and stare at him in amazement. At first I was confident that I understood Him, but now I am not so sure.

- Oswald Chambers

Why do you call me, “Lord, Lord,” and do not do what I say?

- Jesus

As a society we're always so quick and able to spend money on lawyers for someone for incarceration, but we don't make the corresponding commitment to the preventative components of it.

- Matt Gonzalez

Whom the Son sets free is free indeed.

- Jesus

That hunger of the flesh, that longing for ease, that terror of incarceration, that insistence on tribal honour being obeyed: all of that exists, and it exists everywhere.

- Ben Kingsley

We live in a country that is addicted to incarceration as a tool for social control. As it stands now justice systems are extremely expensive, do not rehabilitate but in fact make the people that experience them worse and have no evidence based correlatives to reducing crime. Yet with that track record they continue to thrive, prosper and are seen as an appropriate response to children in trouble with the law. Only an addict would see that as an okay result.

- James Bell

Notes

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2. Walvoord, John F., and Roy B. Zuck. The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985. p. 217.
3. Woodroof, Tim. The World According to Luke: the Upside Down Kingdom. Brentwood, TN, Look Press, 1998.
4. “Mass Incarceration in the United States: At What Cost?: Hearing before the Joint Economic Committee Conducted by Senator Jim Webb, Congress of the United States, One Hundred Tenth Congress, First Session, October 4, 2007.” Washington: U.S. G.P.O, 2008. Print. Online location: http://jec.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?p=Hearings&ContentRecord_id=7a22e2ab-7e9c-9af9-7bb7-4a1b88554f61&ContentType_id=14f995b9-dfa5-407a-9d35-56cc7152a7ed&Group_id=cb5dcfe4-afee-419f-94ee-e51eb07de989&MonthDisplay=10&YearDisplay=2007 accessed 3 February 2010
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<http://webb.senate.gov/newsroom/pressreleases/2008-12-05-01.cfm> accessed 3 February 2010

8. Ministry with Prisoners & Families: The Way Forward by W. Wilson Goode Sr., Charles E. Lewis Jr., and Harold Dean Trulear.