



CELEBRATION OF VOCATIONS (LABOR DAY)

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, September 5, 2010

Lamont Anthony Wells, Guest Lectionary Commentator

Senior Pastor, Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Reformation (ELCA), Philadelphia, PA

Lection - Deuteronomy 24:14-15 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 14) You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns. (v. 15) You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them; otherwise they might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

On the first Monday in September, our nation pauses to celebrate workers and their contributions to the welfare of our entire country. To that end, Labor Day raises awareness of the need for economic justice in our communities. As we celebrate this Labor Day, many in the African American community must renew our efforts to bring

attention to the American promise that if you work hard you should be able to support yourself and your family.

Labor Day Sunday services for African Americans celebrate the fact that people of color in this nation have worked tediously to shape our nation into a powerhouse of economic greatness. And it's not just us, but Native Americans, Hispanic and Asian Americans, and many poor white Americans who suffered, bled, and died for the railroads, steel factories, and in militaristic employment for land and economic control of the world's resources that have benefited the wealthy.¹

Today's scripture reminds us to continually be aware of the way that we treat others. We need to be certain that we are not economically exploiting those who we have the power to oppress. Laborers contribute to our communities; our task is to be part of the solutions that restores dignity to those workers who are less fortunate than ourselves.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Deuteronomy 24:14-15

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Many of us in Black America see the contradictions in our society. Although the national minimum wage increased in July 2009 to \$7.25 per hour (\$15,080 per year), earning the minimum wage currently means earning a poverty wage. In our text (Deuteronomy 24: 14-15), the poor and needy were to be treated fairly under the Hebrew law whether they were Jews or Gentiles. This text speaks volumes to the denial of rights and dignity of poor workers as they are violated all around the world.

For many years, American industry has contributed to this global oppression. It has done so by moving many of its manufacturing and other types of business operations into economically depressed nations where workers can be exploited by paying them salaries that are but a small fraction of what American employees require. America is taking advantage of the poverty in those nations and creating unemployment at home. The lower payments to foreign workers mean bigger profits for the shareholders, a few more get rich while so many more have not and the ranks of the poor and destitute swell.

Deuteronomy (vv. 14-15) encourages economic justice and fair wage policies in the world community not economic oppression.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The book of Deuteronomy has as its main focus the describing of the second body of laws given to Israel through Moses, supplementing those given at Horeb (see Deut. 29:1). The whole of the book may be described as "preaching law." The aim of its content is to provide both the framework for a national constitution of Israel and a basic summary of every citizen's rights and duties. Deuteronomy 24:14-15 presents the proper attitude that we are to take toward fellow members of creation. These verses take the law to a holistic level by declaring an obligation and duty to treat all persons fairly and justly.

Most of the Deuteronomistic laws provide for the care of the Hebrew people and their covenant with God. The writer, however, includes foreigners when speaking of fair wages and economic justice in today's scripture. This brings clear theological attention to the Judeo-Christian responsibility to not oppress, ostracize, or omit any person from receipt of just wages for their labor.

According to the text, manufacturers and employers have the responsibility to produce high quality, fairly priced products and pay a wage reasonable for the work performed regardless of the worker's race or gender. The laws presented in Deuteronomy provide a handbook for administration in civil or criminal cases where wrongs have been perpetuated and society must act against the wrongdoers.

If justice were omitted from business practices as in the case of the employer and hired servant, the servant-laborer had a legal right to speak up against the injustice or lack of due payment. The law taught that unjust treatment of employees by employers would bring forth the judgment of God against the oppressor.

The distinct feature of this passage of scripture is its placement amongst a laundry list of laws with no distinct order to its placement. This suggests our clear responsibility to lift economic justice as an issue even as so many of other hot button topics vie for attention. This book was addressed to lay people, women and men. It was the Levitical priest's responsibility to lift the message of this law before the people repeatedly and not to omit this subject matter. The priest is to aid in the fight to solve inequities in matters of employment and labor.

The writer uses the word "oppress" to define the vileness that would be perpetrated when an employer failed to properly pay an employee. This word in Hebrew is "ashaq," which means to do fraud, violate, get deceitfully, or deceive. This language specifically speaks of an employer's intent to do wrong; they meant to harm workers. African Americans know this behavior all too well. During American slavery there was never an intention to pay fair wages because of the greed and sinful desire to "oppress" on the part of the slaveholders.

These verses require two-fold justice for workers; pay them fairly and be timely in paying them. Verse 15 states, "You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them. . . ." Many people suffer from low wages, but many others suffer from the methods through which they are paid. Often, families struggle with paying bills on time because of the frequency of pay. Modern labor industries oppress workers with awkward pay periods and the oppression is then exacerbated by banking or financial industries that hold or delay full access to funds for laborers. This has added to the rise in high interest check-cashing operations and predatory high interest payday loan businesses.²

III. Other Materials That Preachers And Others Can Use

The U.S. Department of Labor website has historical information on Labor Day and

current information relevant to labor such as: work place rules and regulations; training for workers; grant opportunities and much more. Online location: www.dol.gov accessed 25 January 2010.

Challenge

As people of faith, we desire to see God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. All people deserve a fair share of the resources that God provides. None of God's children should work for poverty wages. This text encourages us to lift up the cry for economic justice for workers everywhere. This commandment or law is a call to put faith into action and help solve the crisis of underpayment of all who work long hours and are barely able to provide for their families. Labor Day is the day to attach a global bullhorn to the cause of suffering oppressed laborers. Since we know God is on the side of the oppressed, that is where we must be also. If the Church does not take up this crucial fight what will God say of us?

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sounds: The outcry of the oppressed stating their claims for economic justice (v. 15); and

Sights: The gates surrounding the land and community of the Hebrew people (v. 14); sun setting at the end of a work day (v. 15).

Notes

1. Mosely, Walter. What Next: A Memoir Toward World Peace. Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 2003. p. 33.
2. Allen, Walter and Reynolds Farley. The Color Line and the Quality of Life in America. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989. p. 289.