

## God Chooses the Poor

Last week's lectionary verses from Song of Songs were just the beginning in a series of weeks from the lectionary that feature readings from what are often termed the Wisdom books of the Old Testament. This category of writings, including Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs (and according to some, the quasi-historical books of Ruth and Esther, as well), plus the Apocryphal books of Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon, focus on how to live well in the world, what you might call practical advice, rather than high theological concepts. The wisdom of these books is based less on divine revelation and more on human observation and experience. For the most part, the books are full of stories and lessons that might be passed down from parent to child or in a formal school setting. While God and humankind's relationship with God may not be often mentioned in these books, it is clear that a proper relationship with God undergirds all of their teachings. As the Book of Proverbs says in several verses, "the reverence of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

In year B of the Revised Common Lectionary, this string of lessons from the Wisdom books is paired with readings from the General Epistle of James. The book of James, which may contain excerpts of sermons from the brother of Jesus who became one of the leaders of the Church in Jerusalem following the Resurrection, is often considered to be the New Testament's contribution to Wisdom literature. It is full of practical advice for how to live a Christian life, with far less attention to intricate theology than we usually associate with the letters of Paul.

So, our focus today will be on practical matters. What Ellen Davis says about the Book of Proverbs could also be said of the Book of James: "The proverbs are spiritual guides for ordinary people, on an ordinary day, when water does not pour forth from rocks and angels do not come to lunch." The lectionary has selected for us three of the poetically written couplets of the practical advice that characterize the book. Like the reading from James, the topic is the poor.

This is not an unusual topic for the Book of Proverbs. There are at least fifty sayings recorded between chapter ten and chapter twenty-nine of the book that address the relationship between rich and poor. While the attitude expressed is that material riches are a part of the reward for living a virtuous life, there is also a repeated warning that those who ignore or exploit the poor will suffer consequences. It is a simplistic, almost "sound-bite" wisdom version of the recurring Scriptural theme that God's people are expected to care for the poor. I hope that many of you will remember the study that Rev. Charlotte Keyes led on the oft-misquoted verse, Deuteronomy 15:11, "There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be open-handed toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land." As is almost always the case in the writings of the Torah, the rationale regards the history of God's people: "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you; for this reason I lay this command upon you today." Those who are prosperous owe their prosperity to God and are expected to use their abundance to bless others. It is a theme taken up by the prophets again and again – it has always been human nature, apparently, to forget the needs of others when one has more than enough. Jesus stood firmly in this prophetic tradition, as his quotation from Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth shows: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor." His apostles carried on the theme; not only James, as in our reading this morning, and Paul, who consistently reminded the churches to whom he wrote to take up collections for the poor, but also the great proponent of brotherly love, John. In John's first general epistle, we read, "How does God's love abide in

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anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." For the writers who recorded Jesus' words in the Gospels and for those who interpreted them in the Epistles, Christians are called to address the needs of the poor in love as the appropriate response to the love of God through Christ Jesus that has changed their lives.

All of this Biblical material on God's care for the poor and perhaps particularly the assertion in verse 23 of our Proverbs reading that God takes up the cause of the poor and vulnerable and James' assertion that God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith has caused adherents of what is known as the Theology of Liberation to claim that God has a preference for the poor. While I find a deep agreement with this thesis both emotionally and intellectually, I am well aware that the claim of a preferential option for the poor on God's side can be troubling. It is important to clear about what this idea does and doesn't mean. I am most indebted to the work of Ronald J. Sider in this regard. Dr. Sider is a Mennonite theologian currently on the faculty of Palmer Theological Seminary, which is affiliated with our own American Baptist Churches, USA. If you've never read his very influential book, Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger, I highly recommend it.

As Dr. Sider writes, the idea that God is on the side of the poor and oppressed does not mean that material poverty is a Biblical ideal. God has created a world potentially rich enough for all men and women to prosper if a just sense of sharing is observed and the Biblical witness is that God desires that all persons should live in the shalom that includes physical and mental well-being. Nor are the poor automatically more righteous than the affluent. Paul's understanding that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God is a universal truth not affected by socio-economic class or any other human devised division. It must also be affirmed that God is not more interested in the ultimate salvation of the poor than of the rich. As we are reminded in the Gospel of John, in a series of verses to which I will return next week, God loves the whole world, all of God's creation, and it is God's will that all of Creation might be blessed and redeemed by relationship with the Creator through Christ.

Nevertheless, it is clear from the Biblical witness that God does stand for and act on behalf of the poor in a special way. From the freeing of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt to the warnings of the prophets to the very Incarnation of God in the form of a helpless baby born to an unwed mother in a poverty-stricken, occupied land, the Bible traces the salvation history of God's active intervention on the part of the poor and oppressed. One cannot read very far in the Bible without coming to the understanding that care for those who are in need is at the very heart of what is required of those who would do rightly in the sight of God.

If this concept still causes us to squirm, perhaps it is because we Americans have been raised less on Biblical proverbs than on a different set of proverbs common to our culture. Consider this set of sayings:

- "When the going gets tough, the tough get going."
- "The early bird catches the worm."
- "A penny saved is a penny earned."
- "You only go around once. Grab for the gusto!"
- "God helps those who help themselves."

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None of these aphorisms come from the Bible, not even the last one, although a lot of folks think it does. As Scott Hoezee points out in the weekly lectionary commentary from Calvin Theological Institute, these modern American proverbs emphasize the individual's responsibility for their own success or failure, lauding those who succeed without reference to the blessings of God and belittling those who fail without a God-honoring sense of compassion. The attitude engendered gives tacit permission for the poor to be ignored, a far cry from God's command that we open our hands to the needy.

Is this concentration on the poor really necessary in one of the richest nations on earth? For me, the answer comes every day as I talk with the poor who come to our door or call on the phone for help from our Benevolence Fund. I speak with a wide variety of people, from the homeless men whose inability to cope with the complexities of life has led them into devastating addictions or profound hopelessness to the women whose men promised them they would never need to work and then abandoned them, often with several children to feed, to those whom the current recession has left with insufficient resources to meet their obligations. As God foretold, the poor are with us always, therefore we must respond.

On this Labor Day weekend, it seems especially appropriate to consider the plight of the working poor. Some of these stories may be familiar to you, as they were to me. In his book, The Working Poor: Invisible in America, Pulitzer Prize winner David Shipler writes of the cycle of poverty that holds many Americans captive: "A run-down apartment can exacerbate a child's asthma, which leads to a call for an ambulance, which generates a medical bill that cannot be paid, which ruins a credit record, which hikes the interest rate on an auto loan, which forces the purchase of an unreliable used car, which jeopardizes a mother's punctuality at work, which limits her promotions and earning capacity, which confines her to poor housing." Shipler's reminder of the need for affordable health care for all people reminds me of a simple message currently making the rounds on Facebook: "No one should die because they cannot afford health care, and no one should go broke because they get sick." I don't pretend to have all the answers in the current health care debate. I'm glad that we're going to be taking the time to study the issues in our adult education hour on Sunday mornings, in an environment where our respect and love for one another should allow us to discuss the issues without the hysteria or personal vituperation manifesting themselves in "town hall" meetings across the country. But I think it is clear, both from the founding document of our nation and from the Biblical witness that our responsibility to our fellow humans includes not only food and shelter but the healthcare which so many of us enjoy. If, like Thomas Jefferson and his colleagues, we hold that all persons are endowed by the Creator with the unalienable right to life, then we dare not endorse a system in which some can afford life-giving medication while others cannot. If we take up the mantle of Jesus in proclaiming good news for the poor and recovery of sight to the blind, then we cannot defend a system in which only those of a certain income level can afford glasses or glaucoma treatment.

Another best-selling author, Barbara Ehrenreich, left behind her own comfortable life for six months to live as an unskilled but fully-employed minimum wage worker. As chronicled in her book, Nickel and Dimed: On (not) Getting By in America, she worked an eight-hour shift as a waitress in Florida plus holding a steady job as a maid for a cleaning service. She then moved to Maine, where she worked as a hotel maid and as an aide in a nursing home. Finally, in

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Minnesota, she clerked at Wal-Mart. During her self-imposed exile from affluence, she lived in budget motels and in rundown mobile home parks, eating only what she could afford, which often meant fast food. She discovered that she needed two unskilled jobs just to afford this minimal lifestyle and that she was nearly always both physically and emotionally exhausted by the effort. In his commentary on our passages this morning, Dan Clendenin notes that according to the National Coalition for the Homeless, “in the median state a minimum wage worker would have to work 89 hours each week to afford a two-bedroom apartment at 30% of his or her income, which is the federal definition of affordable housing.”

Those stories and statistics are from early in the decade but things have certainly not gotten easier for the working poor. Earlier this year, *The Seattle Times* published a report from the University of Washington showing that a family of three in Western Washington, with one working adult and two children, needs an annual income of \$50,000 to cover basic needs. At minimum wage, that would require that one adult to work an average of 119 hours/week, if they took two weeks off sometime during the year, or 112 hours/week if they took no vacation. This week, *The New York Times* published a disturbing study conducted by researchers in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. The study showed that low-wage workers are routinely denied proper overtime pay and are often paid less than the minimum wage. 68 percent of the workers interviewed had experienced at least one pay-related violation in the previous work week, violations that averaged 15% of their weekly pay. To quote from the *Times* article: “The researchers said one of the most surprising findings was how successful low-wage employers were in pressuring workers not to file for workers’ compensation. Only 8 percent of those who suffered serious injuries on the job filed for compensation to pay for medical care and missed days at work stemming from those injuries. “The conventional wisdom has been that to the extent there were violations, it was confined to a few rogue employers or to especially disadvantaged workers, like undocumented immigrants,” said Nik Theodore, an author of the study and a professor of urban planning and policy at the University of Illinois, Chicago. “What our study shows is that this is a widespread phenomenon across the low-wage labor market in the United States.”” For those who have been trumpeting America’s new post-racial society, it should be noted that the study disclosed among American-born workers, African-Americans had a violation rate nearly triple that for whites. By the way, the study was conducted in the first half of 2008, before the pressures of the recession reached their current levels.

But what can our appropriate response be to such dreadful injustice? Few of us, if any, have the ability to change behaviors of companies that might be indulging in these illegal practices. It would be difficult, if not impossible to sort through the maze of interrelationships among corporations to mount an effective boycott against offending corporation. We can, of course, bear witness to our convictions in these matters by reminding our lawmakers that justice is being imperfectly served and that they hold the responsibility of the commonweal. But we are perhaps most effective when we take action locally or join with a larger group to act in a more far-reaching manner. This morning, I distributed to our children the means of joining one of those larger groups – those supporting American Baptist International Missions with their pennies and quarters and dollars which will go to alleviate suffering and injustice among the poor of other lands as well as introducing them to the healing message of the Gospel. Most of you will by now have noticed that we have not yet taken up our weekly offering, nor our monthly gathering of funds for our Benevolence Fund. With both of these collections, we have the opportunity to

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support the poor in our neighborhood. Part of our general fund goes to keeping our building open to those who meet here searching for release from addictions that may keep their ability to earn restricted. The Benevolence Fund has a direct effect on the poor of our city as these funds are used to provide groceries for struggling families or for the homeless, as well as occasional help with medical expenses, utility payments and even rent for those in need. So far this year, every dollar given to the Benevolence Fund has been spent in this way and we have reached into a small accumulated surplus to extend our ability to help.

We will close our service of worship together this morning with our monthly celebration of The Lord's Supper following the collection of our tithes and offerings. I encourage you to consider these two expressions of worship as a unit this morning. We celebrate the Supper in response to a commandment from Christ Jesus — that we would remember him and his sacrifice for us whenever we gathered to eat the bread and drink from the cup. In this action, we remember the love of God for us, that God so loved the world that God sent the only begotten son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. In a like manner, as the plate for the offering is passed, let us remember the command of God that we should open our hands to the poor, not out of a sense of duty but because it is our proper, loving response to the God who loves us and who blesses us so richly. As we come to these twinned remembrances of God's love for us, for that amazing, all-encompassing, healing love, thanks be to God.