



Video <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vzUQkOjxccw>

CHRISTIAN EDUCATION/GRADUATION SUNDAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, May 26, 2013

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Lection – Isaiah 1:17 (Revised Standard Version)

Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Forest Long, an executive of the Young and Rubicam Advertising Agency, understood the value of educational training when he penned one of the most famous slogans in the history of advertising for the United Negro College Fund: “A mind is a terrible thing to waste” (1972). In eight small words this slogan captures both the veneration of education and the objection towards wasting the mind and accords a lofty role to education. This was, and still is, an appropriate slogan for the UNCF because people of color have fought “tooth and nail” to acquire education (academically or autodidactically) in order to analyze the world around them. They did this while colonized-minded people adamantly fought “tooth and nail” to keep education as far away from our foreparents as possible. This is why the African American community celebrates and renders praise unto GOD for every single graduation. We recognize that access to education was not always afforded. And we acknowledge that it is only by the grace of GOD and the strength of our ancestors that we can now enter any high schools and universities around the country. This makes us celebrate every graduation.

This year, Christian Education Sunday and Graduation Sunday are merged on our Lectionary calendar. This makes perfect sense for African Americans whose first sites of formal education were churches. It also makes sense given the signal role still placed on secular education and Christian education in the African American church. We have long

known that in order to “do good,” as today’s text implores, one needs some learning (education) and burning (the fire, wisdom, and courage given by the Holy Spirit). So, since our history is not one that has separated the two, this tell us today that now, as much as ever, those believers who are privileged to graduate high school, college, or graduate school are charged with “doing good, seeking justice, correcting oppression, defending the fatherless, and pleading for widows.” Those who are educated are charged with doing these things; Lord have mercy, what else is an education for?

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Isaiah 1:17

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

On March 28, 2012, Congressman Bobby Rush (IL) epitomized this very passage by showing the power of prophetic witnessing when he used his Christian Education to quote Scripture on the House floor. During his speech he wore a grey hoodie to show his solidarity with and support for the Trayvon Martin rallies.

Trayvon Martin was supposed to turn 18 in 2013 and subsequently graduate from high school, but he will not because he was killed by senseless gun violence. Hundreds of black boys and girls in Chicago were supposed to graduate from middle schools, high schools, and colleges across this nation, but they won’t because of violence. We need more preachers, congresspersons, teachers, and parents like Congressman Rush who will use their Christian education to “do good.” We need leaders who take both the lives of our children and the duty of prophetic witnessing seriously, leaders who understand that the Scriptures require us to do good and use our Christian education in the world in which we live. Christian education, like secular education, is not something obtained for personal good only. It’s meant to be shared with others.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Tradition ascribes authorship of the book of Isaiah to Isaiah son of Amoz, but for over a hundred years scholars have seen it as a compilation of writings from three different periods. The first, termed Proto-Isaiah (chapters 1–39), contains the words of the 8th-century BCE prophet with 7th-century BCE expansions. Historically, the oracles and poems from Proto-Isaiah are some of the most widely known prophetic sections in the Hebrew Bible. Chapter one from the Book of Isaiah is most likely a collection of Proto-Isaiah’s sayings organized and structured into a slightly thematic narrative. The narrative highlights YHWH’s frustrations with the Kingdom of Judah that involved: covenant breaking, allowing political injustices, and feeble attempts at ritualistic placation. According to the text, YHWH has been good to them; they have been protected, groomed, and loved but instead of humility and gratitude, Judah turned their backs on YHWH (1:4).

Proto-Isaiah was not only a prophet with temple privileges but was also a statesman who showed an acute awareness of the political climate in his time. He was aware of the corrupt leaders who were taking advantage of the people while simultaneously trying to

placate YHWH. He knew all too well that the leaders did not truly love YHWH; they only loved the protection of YHWH and the benefits of being identified with YHWH. He was even aware of the fatherless and the widows in the society who were being economically trampled and were without advocates . Given Proto-Isaiah's community awareness, he was the perfect prophetic figure to say what thus saith the Lord.

Judah broke their covenant with YHWH by worshipping other gods and by politically engaging in acts of injustice. They were supposed to follow YHWH's commands and treat each other with dignity, respect, and fairness but they did not keep their end of the covenant. The religious leaders in the Kingdom of Judah thought they could placate YHWH by sacrificing and continuing with their rituals and customs. But that was not the case. YHWH is not a deity whose existence is contingent upon the praise of humans. YHWH does not need to receive adulations in order to be GOD. And, YHWH cannot be fooled by burnt offerings; the eternal GOD cannot be bought with collection plates. Therefore, their pseudo praises and shallow rituals did not suffice.

YHWH, through the words of Proto-Isaiah, not only chastises Judah for their wrongdoings, but also reminds them of what living righteously entails: "Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow."

In this one Scripture there are five verbs: learn, seek, correct, defend, and plead. Each verb is followed by a divine command. YHWH has already told the people of Judah what doing good looked like. Given the breadth of the list, this text can be read as YHWH implying that good behavior is a process in which one must be constantly engaged. At the core of each of these markers for righteous living are two fundamental divine beliefs. One, God wants us to care about and for one another as God cares for us. And, two, God gives priority to the disadvantaged. Unlike the American trickle-down economic theory which asserts that if those at the top are given priority in all things (taxation, law making, and the application of laws) then everyone else will reap the benefits, YHWH turns this notion on its head. He says, take care of those at the bottom, then everyone else will be okay. So, learn to do good, period; especially for the sake of the disadvantaged. Else, what is an education for? Why go to school and put in hour upon hour, upon hour, upon hour of time studying if not to finish one's course of study and go out into the world and make it better for those most in need? Indeed, what else is an education (Christian and secular) for?

Seeking justice implies that injustice is readily present; to bring about justice requires work. Wherever there is injustice, the children of GOD—those who are called by GOD—should be present fighting on justice's behalf. What good is a Christian education if one ultimately does not use it to fight against the entities and institutions that are the enemies of God? Correcting oppression is a lifetime task. Unfortunately, there are times when believers, God's folk, the Church, are the ones doing the oppressing. We, like the Kingdom of Judah, need to learn to stop the oppressors—outside of us and inside of us. Defending the fatherless and pleading for the widow shows that we, as those called by GOD, should be caring for the most vulnerable in society and not leaving their fate to chance. This is the first task of educated believers—to do good for the disadvantaged.



In the pantheon of American leadership, Benjamin E. Mays was a 20th-century version of Proto-Isaiah who called America to a higher moral order through a synthesis of religion and Christian education. Mays, a man Born to Rebel, helped thousands of African American men graduate from Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia, and placed within them the desire to do good and give back to their communities. Mays did not allow his students the chance to think that the mere act of earning a degree and graduating was in any way giving back to the Black community; each graduate was to go out into the world and do good. Mays preached and taught that education and righteous conduct go hand in hand. Like Mays, preachers should use this text as a way to show that rituals, routines, and graduations cannot appease GOD. GOD cannot be placated by selfish ambitions at the expense of neglecting “the least of these.” GOD cares about justice. GOD cares that we care for one another. GOD cares about whether we love one another.

Celebration

Congratulation, Graduates! I am happy to tell you that, as you go forward to your next great achievement, we serve a God who demands that goodness and justice take place. We serve a God who encourages education and liberation. We serve a God who sends us to work on behalf of the forgotten and neglected. This is a God of love, mercy, and justice. This is a God who will not fail us; so we can move forward against obstacle, because the power of this God, Holy Ghost power, is the wind beneath our wings.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sounds: (v. 1) Metaphorical trumpets, drums, tambourines, and other instruments; the cries of the oppressed, the fatherless, and widows; and

Sights: A prophet on a mountaintop declaring a significant message; a speaker at a graduation declaring a significant message (metaphorical); inmates receiving justice and mercy; oppressive financial laws being corrected in favor of the disadvantaged; fatherless children graduating high school and going forward to do good.

IV. Other Materials That Preachers and Teachers Can Use

Dr. Emilie Townes speaking at Spelman Graduation (2011)
video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uOKO1a2GByQ>

Books

- Born to Rebel: An Autobiography by Benjamin E. Mays
- A Voice from the South by Anna Julia Cooper
- Up from Slavery by Booker T. Washington

Speech

- “Blessings of Liberty and Education” given by Fredrick Douglass in 1884