



ECONOMIC JUSTICE/FINANCIAL LITERACY SUNDAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, January 27, 2013

The African American Lectionary Team

Lection – Isaiah 61:8-9 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 8) For I the LORD love justice, I hate robbery and wrong; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. (v. 9) Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring in the midst of the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge them that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

In the shadow of our present economic catastrophe and the banking practices that precipitated the “Great Recession,” the African American community has been disproportionately affected, worsening what has already been a prolonged recessionary pattern of joblessness and underemployment. In the midst of this, predatory lending practices and racist banking practices continue to depress economic uplift in African American communities.

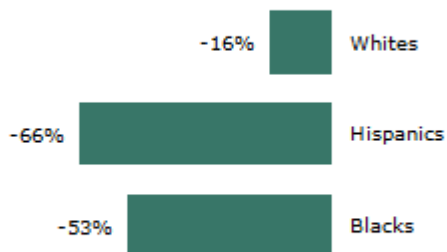
The stark facts: The median wealth of white households is 20 times that of black households and 18 times that of Hispanic households, according to a Pew Research Center analysis of available government data from 2009. “These lopsided wealth ratios are the largest since the government began publishing such data a quarter century ago and roughly twice the size of the ratios that had

prevailed between these three groups for the two decades prior to the Great Recession that ended in 2009.

The Pew Research Center analysis finds that, in percentage terms, the bursting of the housing market bubble in 2006 and the recession that followed from late 2007 to mid 2009 took a far greater toll on the wealth of minorities than whites. From 2005 to 2009, inflation-adjusted median wealth fell by 66% among Hispanic households and 53% among black households, compared with just 16% among white households.

As a result of these declines, the typical black household had just \$5,677 in wealth (assets minus debts) in 2009, the typical Hispanic household had \$6,325 in wealth, and the typical white household had \$113,149 in wealth.

Percentage Change in Median Net Worth of Households, 2005 to 2009



Source: Pew Research Center tabulations of Survey of Income and Program Participation data
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Moreover, about a third of black (35%) and Hispanic (31%) households had zero or negative net worth in 2009, compared with 15% of white households. In 2005, the comparable shares had been 29% for blacks, 23% for Hispanics, and 11% for whites.”¹

For many months, we heard the phrase “falling off the financial cliff.” Most African Americans fell off the financial cliff many years ago. As has been the case historically, African Americans are at the bottom of most financial well-being indicators and in great need of becoming more financially literate and in need of taking more personal responsibility for their financial condition. The government, even with President Obama in office, will not make African Americans more financially literate. Nor will it provide economic justice, unless pushed to do so.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Isaiah 61:8-9

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Randy Williams wrote an article for the Madame Noire website titled “7 Words That Will Close the Black Wealth Gap.” According to Williams the 7 words are: collaboration, legacy, ownership, education, technology, globalization, and service. While we agree with Williams about most of these, our list does contain a few different components. Our 7 words are: God,

village-focus, education, ownership, legacy-building, government intervention, and global-technological focus. (Okay, maybe we used more than seven words.) See today's cultural resource unit for information on our 7 words.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Isaiah speaks to a community that is deeply affected by “principalities and powers,” yet Isaiah is calling his people to practice a life of faithfulness in the face of such realities. At verse one of chapter 61, he claims his power and his purpose: “The **spirit** of the LORD God is upon me because the LORD has **anointed me**; he has sent me to **bring good news to the oppressed**...” If there was ever a need for the oppressed to receive the good news of financial justice, the time is now.

In our contemporary moment, economic justice and financial literacy go hand in hand. They are practices of faithfulness and defiance of principalities and powers as we become informed about how money works and how handling finances can often be unwittingly drawn into economies that are not of God. Here, finances can be seen to be connected to the covenant we have with God, as a practice of faithfulness that requires both education (understanding the systems in which we are participating) and a realization that these practices are displays of our fidelity to God. In these two moments, such a covenantal understanding of finances allows us to recognize the systems that seek to enslave us and how we can use the right financial practices to resist the idolatry of the financial cartel and advocate for the financial dignity of others.

Isaiah makes clear that he has come to bring good news to the oppressed. In order to be heard, he will by necessity have to confront the perpetrators and sources of marginalization being endured by his people. The perpetrators of economic justice operate by drowning out the voices of the poor and their advocates. God has sent the Prophet and as verse 8 shows, God is in agreement with him, so God says, “For I the LORD love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing.” In other words, the Prophet has not only been anointed for his work by God, but God says in the strongest voice that justice is the work that God loves.

God also says in the strongest voice, “I HATE robbery and wrongdoing.” God hates that banks overcharge people based on race. God hates that pay-day loan companies swoop in to ravaged communities and offer loans with exorbitant interest rates. God hates that churches sit inside comfortable sanctuaries on cushy pews while the poor continue to fall off financial cliffs. If God hates robbery and wrongdoing, we must hate it too.

So, the Prophet not only announces God's agreement with justice work, but also makes clear God's desire that this justice be the NEW proclamation that is permanent in its impact on the economic and social life of the Prophet's community and of all of God's people.

Isaiah speaks to his people who have endured destruction for many generations. Their city (Jerusalem) has been torn down and their temple sacked. The Babylonians did this in 587 BCE. But many decades after this destruction and enslavement by the Babylonians the people are still not healed. Poverty and in-fighting plague the people. Things are not well in Jerusalem. The

prophet arrives to teach, inspire, unify, and prophesy a reversal of their fortunes. “Because their shame was double, . . . they shall possess a double portion; everlasting joy shall be theirs” (v. 7).

When reading verse 7, African Americans could reasonably proclaim, Really? Will we finally get our forty acres and our mule too? Some may know that this promise of reparations (land and a mule) was given to blacks right after the Civil War and was withdrawn after Lincoln was assassinated. But the Lord is not a man who can lie. If God said it, it shall come to pass.

But the Lord cannot move to deliver justice and stop robbery and wrongdoing without the hands, feet, ideas, voices, and advocacy of today’s prophets. Just as the Prophet in the text had to persuade his beleaguered nation, black folk have to be convinced after many years of little and lack that their future can hold something different. This is the work of today’s prophets: to help us see that economic justice is possible. Fortunately, now that we are all members of the Royal Priesthood, we all can do our part to end financial injustice. We do not have to sit idly by as politicians, corporations, and those who despise the poor wreak havoc on the lives of the poor. Additionally, we can organize and teach. A word from pulpits and Sunday School classes is needed to help the poor lose less of the little they have and to teach those with more to be generous and fight for those who have less. Jesus had to REPEAT the words of Isaiah 61 in Luke 4. Jesus knew that there will always be a need for voices to speak for the poor and against those who continue to make the lives of the poor harsh and unbearable.

In this generation and in every generation, we must cry out like the Prophet in Isaiah and like Jesus. We have good news for the poor and must not be slow or cowardly in delivering it. We will deliver it through picket signs, petitions, legislation, lawsuits, and financial literacy classes. A new future is possible because God promises to be in everlasting covenant with them (verse 8) and with us and because God has provided the appropriate work clothes: garments of salvation and robes of righteousness (verses 9-10). Our community, which has for so long choked under the weight of poverty, can begin to breathe again as it inhales the promises and power of God. We have waited long enough.

Celebration

A song says, “Ain’t gonna let nobody turn me around, turn me around, turn me around. Ain’t gonna let nobody turn me around. Gonna keep on walking and doing it in Jesus’ name. Ain’t gonna let no apathy turn me around, turn me around, turn me around. Ain’t gonna let no apathy turn me around, turn me around, turn me around. Gonna keep on walking and doing it in Jesus’ name. Ain’t gonna let no poverty turn me around, turn me around, turn me around. Ain’t gonna let no poverty turn me around. Gonna keep on fighting and doing it in Jesus’ name.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sights: The Prophet speaking to encourage the people of Zion; the destroyed city of Zion and destroyed African American communities throughout America; people dressed in ragged

clothing; faces of depressed people; children in dilapidated schools; God in covenant with those fighting to end poverty and lessen economic justice;

Sounds: People begging for food; lobbyists arguing for legislation to increase the coffers of rich companies; advocates shouting for justice as they picket and demonstrate; and

Colors: Dirty clothes; ragged shoes; empty household shelves; the feet of the homeless; and the red ink on signs of protestors.

III. Other Material That Preachers and Teachers Can Use

Please see today's Cultural Resource unit for a great deal of information that you can use to preach on Economic Justice and to teach financial literacy.

Note

1. Kochhar, Rakesh, Richard Fry, and Paul Taylor. "Wealth Gaps Rise to Record Highs between Whites, Blacks and Hispanics—Twenty-to-One." Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends, July 26, 2011.