



MISSIONARY SUNDAY (MISSION WORK AT HOME)

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Lection - Jude 1-4, 24-25 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) Jude, the servant of Jesus Christ, and brother of James, to them that are sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in Jesus Christ, and called: (v. 2) Mercy unto you, and peace, and love, be multiplied. (v. 3) Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints. (v. 4) For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ.

(v. 24) Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy. (v. 25) To the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Missionary Sunday (mission work at home) is a celebration of the expansion of Christianity and an affirmation of the call to Christian service. Many African American congregations were established after emancipation as an expression of freedom and community. They gave praise to God and provided uplift to our people. African American congregations have long been service oriented. They have built strong community organizations, created schools, and championed social welfare causes. Missionary Sunday is both backward and forward looking. We look backward to the pain and triumph of our horrific past. We look forward to the progress and promise the future holds.

Missionary Sunday calls the community to action. We remember that God is a God of liberation and empowerment and that we are co-laborers with God. We remember that God calls us to minister to the have-nots and the have-too-littles. It reminds us that we are as strong as our weakest member, and that we must rejoice and cry as one. Missionary Sunday is a radical challenge to unfettered capitalism and material consumption. It invites us to be a blessing to others. It reminds us that the greatest among us serve. The black church has a lofty history of service to the less fortunate that must be continued.¹

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Jude 1-4, 24-25

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

At present, Christianity is under attack, and the social gospel is invisible. Americans are being wooed by financial fantasies. However, the economic and social reality is depressing. Gas, food, and home ownership are becoming economic luxuries for far too many. Social mores, good public education, and communal responsibility are passé themes. More importantly, the message of material consumption, merely being concerned about the individual, and ideas of inherent superiority, are all being nurtured under the banner of evangelical Christianity.

For African Americans, the first chapter of Jude signals a call to arms. It demands a positive and radical response to live out our faith in a fashion that honors our Christ and lifts humanit.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

A Servant of Jesus Christ

The opening of this book is quite simple. It is attributed to Jude. The King James Version identifies him as a servant (v.1). Other versions identify him as a slave. Scholars claim that this is a pseudonymous work. The identity of the author remains unknown, but his

station is obvious – he is a servant of Jesus Christ. This suggests two points of significance for Christians. First, we are servants, slaves even, for Jesus. We are in God’s service. We are God’s handiwork. We must always represent our maker. We best represent God when we do what God commands us to do. Second, we may accomplish our service and yet remain anonymous. Indeed, it may be best that we remain unknown, lest we attempt to take some of the credit and glory that belongs only to God.

What to Guard against

It is clear that God is the major actor in this text. It is also clear the God’s knowledge and power is being defended and disassociated from human wisdom. Historically, the writer exhorts Christians to protect themselves from Gnostic teachings. In our contemporary context, we must protect ourselves from a lopsided prosperity gospel and spiritual escapism.

In Jude, we are told to contend for the faith. Here faith is not used to describe a capacity or confidence. Unlike the faith chapter of Hebrews, here faith is most appropriately meant to suggest orthodoxy. The writer painfully contrasts the source of faith with the source of condemnation. Faith was delivered unto the Saints. The erroneous doctrine that must be fought against is the result of human wisdom. Faith is ancient. The erroneous doctrine is a new development. Faith affirms Jesus Christ as Lord. The erroneous doctrine does not. Faith was delivered proudly, publicly and all at once. The erroneous doctrine is secretive, piecemeal, and partial. It is a religion of culture. It is a religion that worships democratic progress and material luxury.

What does this have to do with mission work at home? Everything! We are reminded by this text that our faith is founded in the missionary and sacrificial witness of Jesus Christ. We are called to dedicate ourselves to defend acts of sacrifice and to exhibit self-denial in a narcissistic society. Missionary work at home requires self-sacrifice. For those who would show forth the wisdom of, and the personality of, Christ, the greatest sacrificer of all, mission work becomes our reasonable service. This is the least we must do.

The Character of Christian Community

The writer assumes community. He uses words that suggest affection, even family ties. The recipients are not students, assistants, competitors or capitalists; they are called, “beloved” (v.3). However, the community is not constituted by human affections, blood relation or even unity of purpose. It is not a voluntary association or social organization. This community is constituted by the work of God (v.1).

God is not only creator of this community, but also the preserver of this community (v.1). It exists by God’s grace, favor and mercy. Thus, the writer expresses his wish that God’s, not his own, grace, peace and love would be multiplied. Here, the writer suggests that the members of the community must do the multiplying. This challenges our response to HIV/AIDS, drugs, poverty and prison re-entry. We are called to multiply God’s grace,

favor and mercy! This is what mission work at home is all about -- multiplying the personality of God on Earth.

God Alone Makes All Achievements Possible

Indeed, the most celebrated part of this text is the writer's worship. God is an all-powerful ruler. God keeps us. Humans are scandalous at their worst and slaves of God at best. This text reminds us that, despite our secular and worldly achievement, we are all, at best, slaves of Jesus Christ. We cannot glory in ourselves. We must glory in our God. We cannot be self-righteous. We must be servants to one another. Myths of personal achievement and boot strapping have no place in Christ. We are called to help someone as we rise or our living will be in vain.

Celebration

This text celebrates a struggle. We are told to fight for the faith; however, at the same time, human frailty and faultiness is contrasted with the only wise God who is able (v.25). But we are still challenged to fight. We must throw a punch. Write an op-ed. Create a YouTube video. We are challenged to fight. We must finance schools, organize marches and wipe out ignorance and oppression everywhere. Yet, we realize that we are powerless. We do not fight in our own power. We do not fight in our own strength. We do not fight under our own banner. We fight for God. Thus, we celebrate that God is able. God has all power. God has power to empower us to empower others and to revitalize communities and our country. We are certain of this and can celebrate our victory because the text suggests that God has a vested interest in our success because glory and majesty are due to God alone. In our fighting, we will not fail because our Creator goes before us and guides us. If we fail, our failure is God's failure. Our glory is God's glory. God cannot fail, and God must get the glory!

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sights: The dress of the servant (v. 1), shady figures who creep (v. 4), God keeping us from falling (v. 24), the glory and presence of God (v. 24), and being presented before God faultless and full of joy (v. 24); and

Sounds: The sound of exceeding joy, the sound of worship while in God's presence, the sound of victory, (v. 24-25).

Note

For further information see the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* for resources on the black church and its mission activities.

IV. Other Suggested Material for the Sermonic Moment

Quote:

To be African American, or an American Black, is to be in the situation, intolerably exaggerated, of all those who have ever found themselves part of a civilization which they could in no wise honorably defend – which they were compelled, indeed, endlessly to attack and condemn -- and who yet spoke out of the most passionate love, hoping to make the kingdom new, to make it honorable and worthy of life.

--James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (1972)

Suggested Reading

Phillips, Kevin. *American Theocracy: The Peril and Politics of Radical Religion, Oil, and Borrowed Money in the 21st Century*. New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2006.

Drayton, Tony. *Transformation and the Church: A Push toward Acceptance within the HIV/AIDS Pandemic*. Rivera Beach, FL: Protective Hands Communications, 2008.