



YOUTH DAY (YOUTH AND HEALTH)

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Lection - 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 16) Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? (v. 17) If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person, For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

Proverbs 3:5-8

(v. 5) Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. (v. 6) In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. (v. 7) Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil. (v. 8) It will be a healing for your flesh and a refreshment for your body.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Youth Day, in many African American churches, occurs with varying degrees of regularity, from once a year to every fifth Sunday. This exciting day in the life of the church is an opportunity to highlight the gifts and talents of the young people within the church through song, liturgical dance, dramatic presentations, spoken word and other appropriate creative expressions. Youth Day also serves the distinct purpose of focusing attention on issues that are particularly relevant to young people in and beyond the church. In this case, the focus is upon issues at the intersection of African American Youth and Health.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 and Proverbs 3:5-8

Part One: Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

As I write, we are at a point in our history where the health of our young people is increasingly at risk. HIV/AIDS is not only spreading rapidly through the African American community, but it is affecting the lives of increasingly younger members of our community. Various forms of violence, ranging from the physical to the psychological, plague black communities threatening the health of the young and the vulnerable. Beyond these oft-quoted realities, the health of African American youth is jeopardized in subtler but equally deadly ways. Addressing the health issues of African American youth will necessarily extend beyond individualistic and often moralistic calls to “make better choices” (especially with reference to their sexuality), though such demands for personal responsibility must be addressed. Equally important, however, will be addressing the “principalities and powers,” or the larger social, political, and environmental issues which adversely affect the health of the entire African American community, and our youth in particular. It is with this broader understanding of “health” and the societal conditions which impinge upon the health of our young people, that I approach the lectionary scriptures in search of a life-giving word.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

In the first text, Paul is most likely addressing the Corinthians collectively, arguing that as a corporate body or the church, they are the temple of God, whose Spirit dwells in the midst of them. Divisions among the Corinthians threatened to tear the community apart—thus, threatening the health of the body/temple. Paul’s reminder that they are the temple of God and that those who would defile God’s temple would be destroyed, should be considered in light of Paul’s larger efforts to unify the church and restore health to the community. Of course, this text also has individual implications. Later in this letter (6:19), Paul employs the metaphor of the temple again to speak of the Corinthians’ physical bodies. So, then, 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, might well be read with this latter verse in mind. As human temples, indwelt by God’s Spirit, the Corinthians very bodies were to be treated with reverence, as “sacred space” not to be “defiled” or “destroyed” either by the Corinthians themselves or anyone else. Paul presses the latter claim further, by insisting that anyone who would “destroy” God’s temple would be met with the force of God’s judgment.

The second text is a classic example of Hebrew wisdom literature. In this particular text, the writer is seeking to establish reliance upon the Lord, as the foundation of true wisdom. Those being instructed in the ways of wisdom are counseled always to, “Trust in the Lord with all of [their] hearts,” (v.6) and not to rely solely on their own insights. At the risk of encouraging a dangerous anti-intellectualism or unreflective faith, the writer argues for a sort of “epistemological humility” or, in other words, recognition of the limits of one’s own ability or capacity to know and a subsequent dependence upon God for guidance. God’s providential guidance is promised to those who have adopted such a posture of humility, in light of one’s own finitude and God’s infinite wisdom. Following this divine guidance should lead one to seek to avoid “evil.” This text now points back to the first text, as verse 8 asserts that humbly following God’s guidance will prove to be “healing for your flesh and a refreshment for your body.”

These texts have several implications for sermons concerning African American youth and health. In a society that has a long historical track record of devaluing, dehumanizing and even destroying black bodies, naming the bodies of African American youth as “God’s temple” takes on new and significant meanings. To name that which has been, and unfortunately continues to be, demonized as the site of God’s indwelling Spirit is indeed subversive. To make such a hermeneutical move is to declare “sacred” that which has been viewed, represented and treated all too often as inherently “profane.” As “sacred space,” the bodies of young African Americans are to be regarded and treated with a reverence appropriate for any space occupied by the divine. To defile or destroy these young black temples, according to the text, is to invite God’s judgment.

Many implications for the health of African American youth flow from the reverence of the bodies of God’s people called for in this text. To begin with, young black people must come to understand *themselves* as God’s temple and regard their own bodies, minds and souls as deserving of reverence and healthy treatment. For African American youth, reimagining themselves as “sacred” will undoubtedly mean praying for God’s wisdom to avoid the kinds of risky behavior, which leave the temple vulnerable to all manner of sickness, disease, violence and other forms of physical harm: such as, (but not limited to), unprotected sexual activity, illegal drug and alcohol abuse and gunplay. Also, adults must see African American youth as sacred bodies and not just “ganstas,” thugs, lost causes, hoochies, future prison inmates and absentee baby daddies. If we begin to see them as young princes and princesses, future presidents, engineers, teachers, parents, preachers, and more, then they will more quickly see themselves and treat themselves the same way. Adults in the congregation must also be challenged to reconsider what it means to reverence the young people in our congregations and communities as bearers of the divine Spirit.

Of course, the call to reverence the body as God’s temple is not limited to the individual but includes concern for others as God’s temple, as well. When we are able to view others with such divine insight, we are then responsible for treating others’ bodies as “sacred space,” worthy of our reverence.

The implications of this text are even broader than this. Many of the threats to young African American’s health and the causes for health disparities between young blacks and other racial

and ethnic groups are not simply on the personal or interpersonal level but on broader social and political levels. Working toward increasing the health of young African Americans will mean also addressing larger structural issues, such as high concentrations of poverty, which inevitably lead to more dangerous environments, leading to riskier decisions which put people of all ages, but particularly youths, at risk. In addition, environmental issues, including the location of toxic waste dumps, landfills and highly polluting factories in African American communities, which tend to be largely ignored within African American Churches, have alarming effects (e.g., increasing the risk of asthma and other health conditions) upon the health of young African Americans. These temples are our children. If we do not fight to save them, no one will.

Celebration

While the Corinthian text makes clear claims about the sacredness of the body as a temple and the ethical implications for the treatment of God's people's bodies (our own and other's), the text from Proverbs initially sets out wisdom for avoiding harm. In the last verse of the proverb, there is wisdom for "healing" and "refreshment" of bodies that have suffered from mistreatment. The text suggests that humbly walking in the presence and guidance of God is in itself "healing" (whether or not a "cure" is involved). Walking with God is "renewing" and "life-giving" to bodies that have *not* been treated with the requisite reverence due a child of God; and, God will give us our due.

Young people can celebrate God's pronouncement of the sacredness of their bodies in a culture that has attempted to render them profane. Further celebration comes from the fact that God's guiding presence is "healing" and "renewing" to mistreated bodies.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in the passage include:

In 1 Corinthians 3:16-17:

Temple/Spirit/Holy: These three terms combined evoke a strong sense of the sacred or that which is to be revered/respected and set apart;

In Proverbs 3:5-8:

Straight Paths: This metaphor calls to mind moral wisdom, and direction as well as righteous living, and

Healing/Refreshment: These words evoke powerful images of restoration, renewal and redemption, which can be contrasted with other images that might characterize bodies that have not been treated as sacred.

III. Other Material for the Sermonic Moment

For more information concerning black youth in general and black youth and health in particular, see the website for the Black Youth Project, sponsored by the Center for Race, Politics and Culture at the University of Chicago. Online location: <http://blackyouthproject.uchicago.edu/> accessed 10 May 2009