

JUSTICE, NOT CHARITY

A sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
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I'd like to dedicate today's sermon to my college chaplain, the Rev. William Sloane Coffin. He's the one who first taught me the meaning of "Justice, not charity." He inspired me to practice law on a church salary in a low-income section of Boston -- which I did for 10 years, providing free legal services to my clients while utilizing a community-organizing and social change strategy. He's the one who pointed me toward ministry in the first place and provided an ideal to which later to aspire in university chaplaincy. He's my modern incarnation of the Prophet Amos, and I'm very grateful that he came here to Memorial Church three years ago to preach my installation sermon. This year a wonderful biography of Bill Coffin has come out subtitled A Holy Impatience.ⁱ Bill also allowed a collection of his words to be assembled by an editor and published this year by the Westminster John Knox Press under the title Credo. I will be taking the liberty of sprinkling my sermon with Coffinisms -- you'll be able to recognize them easily, since essentially the prose will be mine, the poetry Bill's.

Today's gospel lessonⁱⁱ is a powerful story of the rich ignoring the poor. The rich man who is dressed in fine linen and feasts sumptuously every day ignores the poor man, Lazarus, lying at his gate, covered with sores. All Lazarus wants is a little charity -- he "longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table."ⁱⁱⁱ The rich man does absolutely nothing for him, but "even the dogs would come and lick his sores."^{iv} There's poetic justice, though, after they both die: the poor man is carried away by the angels to be with Abraham, while the rich man is tormented in the flames of Hades. Then, as the rich man begs Abraham, across the great chasm, to send Lazarus to his father's house to warn his brothers against conduct that will also send them to Hades, Abraham has this wonderful retort: "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."^v

And what do the prophets say? In the words of Amos read earlier by Richard Duncan: "Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground...You [who] trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain...Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate...I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies...But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream."^{vi}

Justice, not charity. Not a few crumbs from a rich man's table but ending the oppression of trampling on the poor by landlords taking away much of the grain that those farming the land have worked hard to produce. Not trickle-down economics or faith-based social services, "but let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream." The water allusion here reminds me of a tamer image often used to distinguish the concept of justice from that of charity. Charity is finding a baby drowning in a stream and pulling it out; charity is pulling out a second baby and a third baby that come floating down the stream; justice is going upstream, finding out who's throwing the babies in, and stopping the evil at its source. "Had I

but one wish for the churches of America I think it would be that they come to see the difference between charity and justice. Charity is a matter of personal attributes; justice a matter of public policy. Charity seeks to alleviate the effects of injustice; justice seeks to eliminate the causes of it. Charity in no way affects the status quo, while justice leads inevitably to political confrontation."^{vii}

A colleague recently pointed me to a Census Bureau report published this summer which explained that the number of Americans living in poverty rose by 1.3 million people in 2003, to 35.9 million, or 12.5% of our population. The figures for children were even worse, with 17.6% of children under the age of 18 living in poverty. For the Census Bureau, a family of four is considered to be living in poverty if their combined family income dips below \$18,810 annually. The number of people without health insurance also rose by 1.4 million in 2003 to 45 million, or about 15.6% of our nation's population. This was the third year in a row that both the health insurance and the overall poverty indices increased. And a significant number of people living in poverty are hardworking people, not just the disabled or unemployed."^{viii} Yet, "The Glory of God is the human race fully alive, and that means at least minimally fed, clothed and housed."^{ix}

As you know, the principal way our government has responded to the recent recession has been through an economic stimulation program based on tax cuts. In the first year of the tax cuts, for the bottom 60% of Americans, the average tax cut was just over \$300. The average for those making over \$1 million was not \$300, but some \$112,000.^x By the year 2010, when the cuts are fully in place, 52% of the total cuts will go to the richest one percent of Americans, whose average annual income will be then be \$1.5 million. That is, of the \$234 billion in tax cuts scheduled for that year, \$121 billion will go to just 1.4 million taxpayers.^{xi} The current administration also wants to eliminate all estate taxes, doing which will benefit only the rich.^{xii} Now, I'm not an economist, but "Economics are not [necessarily] a science; they are [often] only politics in disguise."^{xiii} As a matter of public policy and politics, this seems like a massive transfer of potential government funds to the rich, in the name of stimulating the economy and providing a trickle-down effect for the poor. "The way we're cutting taxes for the wealthy and [at the same time cutting] social programs for the poor, you'd think the greedy were needy and the needy were greedy."^{xiv}

There's one area I know a fair amount about personally from my work as a poverty lawyer. I was doing a lot of housing law in the 1970's, when there was virtually no homelessness problem in Boston or anywhere else in the nation. A big problem had developed, though, by the time I left my law practice to go to Tufts as the university chaplain in the mid-1980's. A political decision had been made which had reduced the federal housing budget from \$33 billion annually to \$7 billion. This was accompanied by political decisions nationwide to de-institutionalize mental patients, without the willingness to fund the community mental health centers required in local neighborhoods to house those patients, as had been promised. A lot of mentally ill people were simply discharged to the streets. As a direct result of these two types of political decisions, in Boston and all over America we suddenly had homeless people visibly everywhere -- sleeping in subways, in parks, on heating grates.

Strangely, this was all happening at the same time as new governmental incentives were being implemented for business, along with general tax reductions -- helping fuel an economic boom which resulted in enormous increases in wealth for the already well-to-do, but not for the poor, who lost ground during the 1980's. Churches and other charitable organizations were

asked to step in, provide shelters and food pantries, and help the homeless and hungry at dramatic new levels. Now, certainly "The churches have to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and shelter the homeless. But they have also to remember that the answer to homelessness is homes, not shelters. What the poor and downtrodden need is not piecemeal charity but wholesale justice."^{xv} They need political action and structural change in society, not just a warm meal and a bed in a church basement.

"Just as to the slave, freedom was not a gift but the restoration of a right no one had any business taking from them, so a home is a right; the homeless are being robbed."^{xvi} Yet, "when the rich take from the poor, it's called an economic plan. When the poor take from the rich, it's called class warfare."^{xvii} It's ironic to remember that "Mr. Conservative," Senator Robert Taft, in the 1940's considered affordable housing a moral imperative (The stated goal of the 1948 Taft Housing Legislation was a decent home for every American family)."^{xviii} It's also true that in my day "I've listened to many a Marxist accuse the churches of having a vested interest in unjust structures that produce victims to whom good Christians can then pour out their hearts in charity. I've listened and I've shuttered, because so often in history it's been so true."^{xix}

As William Sloane Coffin explains, "Many of us are...eager to respond to injustice, as long as we can do so without having to confront the causes of it... There's the great pitfall of charity. Handouts to needy individuals are genuine, necessary responses to injustice, but they do not necessarily face the reason for injustice. And that is why...so many business [and governmental] leaders today are promoting charity; it is desperately needed in an economy whose prosperity is based on growing inequality. First these leaders proclaim themselves experts on matters economic, and prove it by [themselves] taking the most out of the economy! Then they promote charity as if it were the work of the church, finally telling us troubled clergy to shut up and bless the economy as once we blessed the battleships."^{xx}

All of this when "Never in recent history have we had so blatant a plutocracy: a government of the wealthy, by the wealthy, and for the wealthy."^{xxi} In the 1990's, "ending welfare as we knew it" constituted one of largest structural reversals ever of the safety net institutions established by the Franklin Roosevelt New Deal. And this reversal was advocated and promoted by a president of FDR's own Democratic party.

The point of "'Justice is to sort out what belongs to whom, and to return it to them.' (Brueggemann). Justice then redescribes the world. And to do justice as God does justice is to intervene in the social order as did Moses in Pharaoh's court when [instead of asking for more food and medicine for the Jews] he insisted on freedom for the Hebrew slaves."^{xxii} To put it another way, "In Scripture, there is no purely spiritual answer to slavery; no purely spiritual answer to the pain of the poor... In times of oppression, if you don't translate choices of faith into political choices, you run the danger of washing your hands, like Pilate."^{xxiii} (66)

In Christian terms, this is because "Human nature is sinful, and therefore the virtue of the few will never compensate for the inertia of the many. Rich people...will not voluntarily open their eyes to see the biblical truth that the poor have ownership rights in their surplus. This they will see only in retrospect, after their surplus is taken away -- by legislation, hopefully, not by violence. Given human goodness, voluntary contributions are possible, but given human sinfulness, legislation is indispensable. Charity, yes always; but never as a substitute for justice.

What we keep forgetting in this country is that people have basic rights: the right to food, the right to decent housing, the right to medical care, the right to education."^{xxiv}

So, in conclusion, the "prophet Amos [cried out] 'Let justice' -- not charity -- 'roll down like mighty waters,' and for good reason: whereas charity alleviates the effects of poverty, justice seeks to eliminate the causes of it."^{xxv} In our gospel lesson, the rich man completely ignores the poor man in his own back yard, providing neither charity nor justice. For that -- for not heeding the voice of the prophets -- he is eternally condemned. May we instead recognize the love which is our birthright and our calling. May we take joy in human caring, in recognizing the kinship we all share. And may we move beyond mere charity to a commitment to justice, which rolls down like waters, like an everflowing stream.

NOTES

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- i. Warren Goldstein, William Sloane Coffin: A Holy Impatience (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).
 - ii. Luke 16: 19-31.
 - iii. Luke 16: 21.
 - iv. Ibid.
 - v. Luke 16:30.
 - vi. Amos 5: 7,11,15,21,24.
 - vii. William Sloane Coffin, Credo (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 62.
 - viii. As cited in Daniel B. Clendenin, "Portfolio Performance," The Journey with Jesus (Palo Alto, CA: September 13, 2004), www.journeywithjesus.net
 - ix. Ibid.
 - x. "The Bush Tax Cut," (Dean for America, 2003), www.bushtax.com
 - xi. Citizens for Tax Justice, "Year-by-Year Analysis of the Bush Tax Cuts....," (June 12, 2002), www.ctj.org/html/gwb0602.htm
 - xii. "The President's Agenda for Tax Relief" (The White House web page), www.whitehouse.gov/news/reports/taxplan.html
 - xiii. Coffin, Credo, p. 56.
 - xiv. Ibid., p. 61.
 - xv. Ibid., p. 155.
 - xvi. Ibid., p. 34.
 - xvii. Ibid., p. 54.
 - xviii. Ibid., p. 54.
 - xix. Ibid., p. 66.

xx. Ibid., p. 65.

xxi. Ibid., p. 53.

xxii. Ibid., p. 63.

xxiii. Ibid., p. 66.

xxiv. Ibid., pp. 55-56.

xxv. William Sloane Coffin, The Heart is a Little to the Left (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999), p. 16.