

Pentecost 14B Proper 18 readings and exegesis 090609
Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; Psalm 125
or
Isaiah 35:4-7a; Psalm 146
James 2:1-10, (11-13), 14-17; Mark 7:24-37

In the name of the God who calls liberated the world through Jesus Christ, Amen.

When I attended Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest, there was a focus on something called “Liberation Theology.” Liberation Theology is that branch of theological thought which emphasizes the Christian mission to bring justice to the poor and oppressed, particularly through political activism. Black Liberationists, feminist Liberationists, Hispanic Liberationists – every branch of Liberation thought says that all of the Bible must be read through the lens of people who are oppressed. In other words, no matter what you read in Scripture, you should keep in mind the way someone who is marginalized by society would read it. Liberation Theology was the dominant theology taught at the seminary when I was there. In fact, sometimes it seemed like it was the *only* theology taught.

Several of the other middle-aged white guys and I got pretty fed up with it at one time. We sat around drinking way too much scotch whiskey one night, discussing how tired we were of being referred to as part of the “evil white man” culture that had oppressed: women, people of color, people who had very little, and people who had something that evil white men wanted. As far as we knew, none of us had ever intentionally oppressed anyone and we were tired of being inferentially labeled. So we

basically went on strike and stopped paying any attention to discussions of Liberation Theology and its tenets. What a mistake that was.

I tell you all of that to show you what a few years in “real world” ministry and an economic meltdown can do to change your perspective. So now, with a heartfelt apology to Professors Michael Floyd and Flora Keshgegian, I say, Jesus was a Liberationist. There is no longer any doubt in my mind; that – while there is no such thing as a perfect theology – Liberation has the edge over many others.

The readings for today, my brothers and sisters in Christ, are liberation texts! There is not a doubt in the world that the author of the Book of Proverbs believed that God was on the side of the poor and the powerless. “Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity?” “Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate?” Do those sound like words written in favor of the people who have wealth and power? And how about what James said? “Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?” And just in case you might have thought to yourself, “Ok. We’re off the hook because the poor are heirs of the kingdom, they’ve got a reward coming so I don’t need to be bothered with them now.” James also answers that. “If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?”

The United States of America – every corner of the nation, every faith tradition, every business and governmental entity – needs a good dose of Liberation theology. The disparity between rich and poor in this country has grown to such incredible dimensions that I would be willing to bet nothing like it has ever been seen in the world. Dr. William Domhoff, wrote:

In the United States, wealth is highly concentrated in a relatively few hands. As of 2004, the top 1% of households ... owned 34.3% of all privately held wealth, and the next 19% (of people) ... had 50.3% (of the wealth), which means that just ***20% of the people owned a remarkable 85%, leaving only 15% of the wealth for the bottom 80%*** (wage and salary workers).¹

That's an awful lot of money in very few hands. Our Lord said that we should care for widows and orphans; and He commanded us to feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, clothe the naked, ***tend the sick*** and visit prisoners. All of this concentration of wealth in less and less hands means one thing for me in terms of Jesus' commands. It means that today, less and less resources are in the hands of the majority of Americans. So if that top 20% does not give in any meaningful way that cares for the poor; and if that top 20% also does not want our government to care for the poor because they abhor tax increases, the poor will not be cared for, because the rest of us see our real incomes dropping as sharply as we see prices rising and we get fearful about who will take care of ***us***.

In today's America, everything revolves around how much money can be made and accumulated. And it's not just oil companies who are making obscene profits on the

Who Rules America? By Prof. G. William Domhoff, Sociology Dept., University of California at Santa Cruz
<http://sociology.ucsc.edu/whorulesamerica/power/wealth.html>

backs of working people. In 2008, the five largest health insurance companies made over \$8b in profit². In the same year, the two largest drug companies in America had combined profits of almost \$16 billion³. Now that's profit – *after* all of their research, administrative and marketing expenses are taken out. \$24b in profit in the healthcare sector in one year. Meanwhile back amongst the people, a 2002 study by the Institute of Medicine estimated that 18,000-22,000 people in this country died that year because they could not afford healthcare. In our world, the rule is – survival of the fittest; make more money. In God's Kingdom the rule is, "if you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to me."

Jesus was a liberationist. There is not a doubt in my mind. Only He didn't pursue his theology on a political stage – which, by the way, is really what bothered me about the Liberation theology discussions in seminary. It was forced on us while we were in school, it was legislated – rather than written on our hearts so that we might see the real truth of it.

Well, the hope of the poor and the downtrodden is now written on *my* heart.

People in this country – the wealthiest country in the history of the world – are starving. People in this country are jobless and homeless. People in this country who *have* jobs are losing their homes because of healthcare costs. Jesus called those in Israel who had power and money that they used to oppress people – "hypocrites." Our

² <http://wonkroom.thinkprogress.org/2009/08/05/are-health-insurers-making-too-much-money/>

³ Fortune 500 "Biggest Winners" 2009

governmental leaders of both parties are just such hypocrites. And the kings of corporate greed in this country are even worse. It is up to us – the bottom 20% of this country – to do all we can to help those who are at risk.

A week ago, I signed on to a “Healthcare Creed,” that was written by Jim Wallace, the editor of the progressive Christian magazine, Sojourners. Here are the highlights of that creed.

As one of God's children, I believe that protecting the health of each human being is a profoundly important personal and communal responsibility for people of faith.

I believe God created each person in the divine image to be spiritually and physically healthy. I feel the pain of sickness and disease in our broken world (Genesis 1:27, Romans 8:22).

I believe life and healing are core tenets of the Christian life. Christ's ministry included physical healing, and we are called to participate in God's new creation as instruments of healing and redemption (Matthew 4:23, Luke 9:1-6; Mark 7:32-35, Acts 10:38). Our nation should strive to ensure all people have access to life-giving treatments and care.

I believe, as taught by the Hebrew prophets and Jesus, that the measure of a society is seen in how it treats the most vulnerable. The current discussion about health-care reform is important for the United States to move toward a more just system of providing care to all people (Isaiah 1:16-17, Jeremiah 7:5-7, Matthew 25:31-45).

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I believe that Christians should seek to bring health and well-being (shalom) to the society into which God has placed us, for a healthy society benefits all members (Jeremiah 29:7).

I believe in a time when all will live long and healthy lives, from infancy to old age (Isaiah 65:20), and “mourning and crying and pain will be no more” (Revelation 21:4). My heart breaks for my brothers and sisters who watch

their loved ones suffer, or who suffer themselves, because they cannot afford a trip to the doctor. I stand with them in their suffering.

I believe health-care reform must rest on a foundation of values that affirm each and every life as a sacred gift from the Creator (Genesis 2:7).

It's not just healthcare, it's our entire economy. It's not about politics. It's about justice. It's about the liberation of the oppressed. It's Kingdom of God work. There are many ways to help. Think about it. Pray about it. Consider Jesus' words. As a part of the bottom 20%, get involved. Do what you can. Or who will?

Amen.