

Sunday, September 5, 2021

“It’s Always About the Bread”

James 2:1-10, 14-17

Mark 7:24-37

The church has a thinking problem. This is a sermon grounded in the history of ideas. I am interested, to borrow the title of a recent book, in “how the word is passed”. Why do humans continue to repeat the same use of oppression? Why do humans continue to demean, enslave, oppress, and exterminate others – sometimes in the name of democracy, sometimes in the name of God, and sometimes both? The treatment of women by the Taliban in Afghanistan will not escape the notice of the God of justice. I would like to unleash the prophet Amos on the Taliban: “For three transgressions of the [Taliban] I will not revoke punishment; because they have ripped open pregnant women [in order to assert male dominance in the name of Allah]. And “because they have pursued their brothers and sisters with the sword and cast off all pity; maintaining their anger perpetually.” And less we Americans think we are more righteous than the Taliban, Amos will have words with us as well: “Because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals – they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth.”

The voice that cries “I am” blends with the wind, the street noise, the stock market cacophony, and the denials of the rich. We know the cries are important, but they are unsettling, and they make such scary demands. Poor people have been hollering down the corridors of history for centuries, fighting for freedom, begging for bread, making up stories for mere survival, dying in the streets, dying under this flag or that flag, belittled by the rich, and denied by kings and elites and history. Sometimes these poor ones have just laid down and died. The way poor folk have been treated gets repeated in every generation with the sanctions of language, laws, politics, religion, and most of all that cruel master known as “economic necessity.” Somewhere today in the streets of the world’s cities the poor are groaning under their bitter lot, crying out from under the current Pharaoh “imposing tasks” and making “their lives bitter with hard service.”

I am interested in how humans have thought about the rich and the poor over the centuries. Ideas that take root in one era, grow spread like kudzu even when pernicious, untrue, and harmful to others. We now live in the age of the fastest dissemination of bad thoughts – unfiltered, unchecked, unverified thought – in

history. People in Mississippi and Texas have been taking a anti-worming pill that veterinarians give to horses as a cure for COVID. A doctor in Mississippi told people, “You are not a horse.” Maybe, like the country singer, David Ball, we can all croon, “Yes, I admit, I’ve got a thinking problem.”

We have trouble with new ideas, even good ones. When the Wright Brothers first flew their plane over Hoffman Prairie in Dayton, Ohio, the press didn’t even bother to send a reporter. Do you know that Amos Root, publisher of *Gleanings in Bee Culture*, is the one who broke the story of the Wright Brothers and their genius? When the editor of the Dayton Daily News was asked some years later, why the newspaper didn’t cover the event, he said, “I guess the truth is that we were just plain dumb” (David McCullough, *The Wright Brothers*).

I will venture a guess that practically everything you have ever been told about the poor is propaganda from rich people interested in protecting themselves. It’s like tobacco interests writing about smoking, the oil companies about the environment, Wall Street about regulations, and men talking abortion. Here’s one of their all-time winning ads: “The poor will be rich in heaven. Here on earth, they should accept their plight” and the church produced this ad. Rich people, powerful people, high society, the 1%, the billionaires, have been promoting a bill of goods, and it has blinded us to the poor. Studies show that middle-class and poor working Americans will vote against their own economic self-interest to protect the rich. Listen please, “When I win the lottery,” is not a good business plan.

The playbook for dealing with the poor was written by Pharaoh over 3,000 years ago. Pharaoh convinced the Hebrew people that they were better off as his slaves. Here’s what they said to Pharaoh: “You have saved our lives; may it please our Lord, we will be slaves to Pharaoh.” This is the oldest of the ideas about the rich and the poor. The rich convince the poor to accept this plight and enslave them for economic profit. Philosopher Michel Foucault details the way this kind of thinking isolates people and builds their relations wholly in terms of harsh economic realities. Liberals and conservatives, good Christians, all joined this parade against the poor – all with the same twisted, immoral, unethical way of thinking. When it comes to God, it is not the economy, it’s justice.

The Pharaoh idea about peasants has matured over the centuries. People think the poor deserve to be poor. People think that the poor have to be policed and locked in jail. As Mrs. Turpin, in Flannery O’Connor’s short story, “Revelation,” screamed at God: “Go on,” she yelled, “call me a hog! Call me a hog again. From

hell. Call me a wart hog from hell. Put that bottom rail on top. There'll still be a top and bottom!"

Leap from Pharaoh way down in Egypt to 18<sup>th</sup> century England. I call attention to Joseph Townsend's (medical doctor and vicar) ideas: "In general it is only hunger which can spur and goad them to on to labor. Hunger is peaceable, silent, unremitting pressure, but, as the most natural motive to industry and labor, it calls forth the most powerful exertions; and, when satisfied by the free bounty of another, lays lasting and sure foundations for good will and gratitude" (Joseph Townsend, *Dissertation on the Poor Laws by a Well-Wisher to Mankind*). Oh my, this is not "Let them eat cake;" this is "Let them go hungry." Again, Pharaoh's old playbook, dusted off, and used again. After all, it was Pharaoh who said, "You shall no longer give the people straw to make bricks, as before; let them go and gather straw for themselves. But you shall require of them the same quantity of bricks as they have made previously; do not diminish it, for they are lazy." Pharaoh politics still a force in our republic.

Pharaoh ideas imprison us still. Look how many centuries people have thought the same thoughts about poor people being lazy. As surely as a 21<sup>st</sup> century Christian clings to a literal 6-day creation, many people cling to outdated opinions about the poor. The poor are supposed to be grateful for the crumbs that fall from the table. But I say unto you, that our God is not a God of crumbs, but a God of enough loaves of bread to feed the world. God's breadbasket is one of generosity and abundance.

Now, there's an urgent need for us to think new thoughts about the poor. Now, we need some words of ancient wisdom endowed with new power: "Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honor him" (Proverbs 14:31). When will we learn that God is going to treat us the way we treat the poor?

It is easy to despair of hope in our time because we have elevated the worst of human vices to the throne of human power. We have raised a generation of politicians who get by on smoke and mirrors, on deceit and deception, on fear and fearmongering. They are witty and masters of the one-liner, but there's no "there" there. Politics has become what Plato once saw as the essence of an evil rhetoric: a kind of flattery, a fake art.

Our politics mostly a tinker at the edges. Politicians are like people attempting to make a faster cash register in a digital age of super computers. Plato's comparison

of rhetoric to “cookery” seems on point. Politics has become like “cooking” where the cooks are not chefs but simply follow a cookie-cutter recipe from Pharoah’s cookbook. Some people have a knack for politics of a certain kind. I call it “Junk food politics.” It satisfies the cravings of an angry and resentful mob, but it has no nutritional value. A kind of Mac-Politics to go along with the Big Macs and the Mac-Flurries. If all you imbibe are “Junk Food politics, you will become obese, develop coronary problems, and die of the stress of excess anger.

If we are going to have old ideas, let’s have the decency to bring back “good” old ideas – like the witness of the Hebrew prophets. “In the face of callous indifference to the suffering wrought by our imperialism, we must draw on the prophetic. The Jewish invention of the prophetic commitment to justice is one of the great moral moments in human history. This was a commitment to justice of an oppressed people. It set in motion a prophetic tradition based on the belief that God had imparted this love of justice because God is first and foremost a lover of justice” (West, 16). A just God shows partiality to the poor.

Then, there’s the old power of Socratic reasoning (the university). Our faith can be sustained only when we are trained to negotiate economics, politics, science, sociology, and philosophy of the biblical faith in a world of competing claims. “The church needs an educated people to present more complexified views of human nature – of violence, sin, peace, and love – than most people have, given their somewhat distorted view of things learned from popular culture. The church needs an educated people to present alternative answers to questions of justice, international relations, and power to present alternative models for how people can live together in ways that liberate and heal brokenness. The church needs an educated people to promote structures that foster the art of welcoming the stranger in a culture of protectionism; to promote that truth is not a possession but a gift in an age of capitalism; to promote that forgiveness is a viable strategy of social reconstruction in a culture of fear” (Harry Huebner, “Learning Made Strange: Can a University be Christian?” in *God, Truth, and Witness: Engaging Stanley Hauerwas*, edited by Greg Jones, Reinhard Hutter, and Rosalee Velloso Ewell, 303).

Now, we need a tough, hard-nosed preacher like the writer of the Epistle of James. He must have matriculated in the school of the Hebrew prophets with Amos as his major professor and dissertation advisor. His post-graduate fellowship was with Jesus – the champion of the poor. Jesus not only takes the side of the poor; Jesus

himself was poor. No place to lay his head. No clothes except the ones on his back. Homeless Jesus. Unemployed Jesus. Poor Jesus. Peasant Jesus. When Jesus says, “The poor you always have with you” he was talking about himself. Jesus was a poor Jewish peasant. Don’t try to sell me this Jesus, the middle-class entrepreneur and businessman who made expensive yokes for rich farmers from his Nazareth carpenter’s shop. And don’t even try to tell me that Jesus came up with a business plan and sold “franchises” to other carpenters in other towns and became rich and successful. I’m not buying this set of bad ideas. The Scripture is clear: “Jesus, though he was rich, yet for our sake, he became poor.” While Joseph was a carpenter and Jesus must have learned from him how to work with wood, in the end he was nailed to pieces of wood called a cross and all he had was one garment on his back.

James is no fan of the rich. “The rich will disappear like a flower in the field; in the midst of a busy life, they will wither away.” And there’s this: “Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you.”

Now is the time for the church to launch into the world of thinking differently. Jacques Derrida suggests that bees lack eyelids and thus always see. They know a lot but can’t learn. They lack the ability to close off sight – that shutting of the eye at regular intervals – which Derrida links to being able to listen better; whereas “man can lower the sheath, adjust the diaphragm, narrow his sight, the better to listen, remember, and learn.” Playfully, Derrida seeks “to cultivate an art of blinking.” In this way we will be able to imagine life differently than it now is. This is important because when it comes to a world of the rich and the poor, we seem incapable of imagining another way of life. From Pharaoh’s playbook to the present, we have mostly been an “unblinking” people. Now, it is time for us to blink so that we can see and hear the voices of the poor. I’m telling you that everything depends on the moment when God hears the cry of the oppressed and sends someone to say, “Let my people go.”

An actual involvement with the poor of our land will be our final hope. I think that any church needs to be about the formation of people who can love the poor and become people who have learned to live as the poor by living with the poor. It may well be, that a church desiring to have what it teaches be disciplined by the Gospel have at the center of their work a Catholic Worker house or a homeless shelter or a social service agency. I am grateful that EF houses Catholic Social Services. While this may only seem a rental agreement, a financial transaction, I believe it needs to

become a vital partnership between the two organizations in the name of justice. Here is a possible starting place for thinking differently.

I'm neither challenging the ideology of the right nor endorsing the ideology of the left. I am a preacher in the tradition of the prophets, trained in the art of Socrates, educated in the university, and schooled by the teachings of Jesus. I am a man of one word: "Repent!" Change our minds before it is too late. What if we would have to walk very different paths in very different ways for the ethics/politics of Jesus to have much sense at all? A completely new paradigm. A different path is necessary now because our situation is as urgent as an aching in the gut.

This hunger for a curiosity consumed by the "question of knowing if one can think differently than one sees" is a vital and central aspect of the church. Unless we are able to make this a power once again in our churches, we will not be able to imagine ways of eliminating hunger and the system of mindless, commodified labor, disciplinary power, systems of reward and punishments, and the theodicies of history that sanction and uphold the entire system.

I am attempting to push us beyond the limits of our thought, our ways of knowing. Now we go forth beyond the edge, into the darkness, to go where no persons have gone before. Now, like Abraham, we go not knowing where we are going.

Sure, this is a lot to ask of you this joining of prophets, Socrates, Jesus, and James, but I invite you to join me on this quest. I am a radical democrat – small "d". I am a catholic baptist – small "c" and small "b." I am a christian – small "c" to indicate my willingness to be taught. I'm a lower-case person. I invite you to join me in wrestling with one question: "What might be possible to see, become, and do better than we currently see, are, and do?" When we answer this question well, we will know what it means to repent!

## MATERIAL LEFT ON THE CUTTING ROOM FLOOR

There are forces dedicated to silencing the voices that cry out in pain. Always in every era there are those ready to whitewash every moment of American history, to downplay the prophetic voice, and to maintain the pretense of a righteous nation. James C. Scott argues, "The struggle is over the appropriation of symbols, a struggle over how the past and present shall be understood and labeled, a struggle to identify causes and assess blame, a contentious effort to give partisan meaning

to local history” (James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*). “There’s a difference between history and nostalgia.”

We also have a habit of bringing back old ideas that were previously dismissed. Have you read Amity Shlaes’ *The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression*? The title misleads because it is the resurrection of some old ideas grounded in the very old economics of what is good for the rich is good for everyone. She resurrects her Lord and Savior, the Market God, and attempts to disinter the discredited creed of “Social Darwinism.”

Rich people use poor people in the most outrageous of ways. When the turmoil of Civil Rights unfolded in Mississippi, the bankers, the plantation owners, the wealthy white men of Mississippi gathered in private country clubs, to sip bourbon and plot insurrection, but they sent the poor working whites to the campus of Ole Miss to try to stop integration. Will Campbell makes clear that the poor white working men of the South were the most used citizens in the land. Ta-Nehisi Coates reminds us, “The tightly intertwined stories of the white working class and black Americans go back to the prehistory of the United States—and the use of one as a cudgel to silence the claims of the other goes back nearly as far. A bargain emerged – offered by rich whites to poor whites: The descendants of indenture would enjoy the full benefits of whiteness, the most definitional benefit being that they would never sink to the level of the slave. But if the bargain protected white workers from slavery, it did not protect them from near-slave wages or backbreaking labor to attain them, and always there lurked a fear of having their benefits revoked. All the poor whites got in the deal was the rung on the ladder just above the blacks and the right not to be called Negroes. If ever there was a historical re-enactment of Jacob swindling Esau of his birthright, this deal is the one.

Cornell West cries out in horror, “On the domestic front, [the Pharaoh playbook] expands police power, augments the prison-industrial complex, and legitimates unlimited male power (and violence) at home and in the workplace. It views crime as a monstrous enemy to crush (targeting poor people) rather than as an ugly behavior to change.” And the churches are up to our steeples in defending, propping up, and maintaining the status quo.

Prophetic witness consists of human acts of justice and kindness that attend to the unjust sources of human hurt and misery. Prophetic witness calls attention to the causes of unjustified suffering and unnecessary social misery. “It highlights

personal and institutional evil, including especially the evil of being indifferent to personal and institutional evil” (West).

Prophetic witness appeals to the cause of transforming the world as communities, as nations, not just as individuals. Jesus says that God will “judge the nations.” “There is nothing tribalistic or nationalistic about prophetic witness. Xenophobic prejudices and imperialistic practices are condemned. Prophetic witness has no room for such petty and pernicious inflictions.” The flag of the USA doesn’t fly over the gates of heaven. America needs the ideas of the prophets front and center in the centers of politics and power and especially in the churches.

Walter Rauschenbusch, for example, offered a possible new way of thinking. It was dubbed the “social gospel,” and the hounds of evangelical faith pursued him as if he were a runaway slave and they ran him to ground and they crucified him and his new-fangled idea. They smashed it to bits by accusing the great Baptist scholar of not having an adequate theology of the church or a clear notion of the atonement. High and holy words of criticism that had nothing to do with the empty bellies Walter was trying to fill.

If I suggested that we should have an economy based on manna rather than mammon, you would dismiss me as a socialist. When Jesus says that we can’t love God and Mammon, we agree with him and go on loving Mammon. Who would dare to suggest that a voluntary reduction in the standard of living? Who would dare preach a “theology of ‘enough’”? How would we know when we have enough of this world’s goods? By and large we are convinced that there are no alternatives to a world so constituted. As it was in the beginning, so it remains to this day. I am not sure we are capable of thinking differently because it is so scary.