

Lectionary Commentary for Labor Day Sunday

September 6, 2009, Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

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James 2:1-10 (11-13) 14-17

The most famous part of this passage from the epistle of James is certainly its blunt assertion “So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” It is helpful that the lectionary committee chose this extended passage from the epistle because the context for that verse makes it clear that the writer of James isn’t talking about works “in general,” or faith in the abstract. He’s talking about the way the followers of Christ treat those who are poor, arguing that if faith is not paired with a commitment to ensuring the well-being of the poor, then it’s not faith at all.

The passage begins with the writer, identified as James in the greeting¹, excoriating the community for showing deference to rich people who come to the assembly and disregard for those who are poor. Interestingly, current biblical scholarship has stressed that most early Christian communities were comprised of poor people². There was no such thing as the “middle-class” as we know it in twenty-first century America. There were the destitute poor, subsistence small farmers and fishers, and merchants earning enough, again, to support their families but not much more. Then there were the extremely wealthy, families who were connected to Rome, who had been given land, exclusive or preferential trading privileges, and social power through these connections.

James’ letter takes aim at the way members of this poor assembly seeks honor and status from being associated, even temporarily, with a rich person who visits the assembly. He poses three rhetorically scathing questions: “Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name [of Christ] that was invoked over you?”³ James asks members of the assembly why they are cozying up to the very people who work against them and their families’ well-being; whose lifestyle and actions are an affront to Christ?

But it’s not enough for James that the congregation not show preferential treatment toward the rich – he presses them to show preferential treatment to their poor neighbors who sit beside them in assembly, some of whom have become destitute (perhaps through the actions of the rich, perhaps through misfortune). James apparently needs to remind this community of something that most poor communities usually do quite well – share among themselves to meet their collective survival needs.⁴ James criticizes members of the assembly for wishing a poor person peace and saying “stay warm and eat your fill” but not actually caring about whether that person will be *able* to eat or stay warm. James presses further to say that it is

¹ James 1:1.

² See “A People’s History of Christianity: Christian Origins” (Fortress Press: 2008) for a compendium of articles by biblical scholars as well as the work of biblical scholar Richard Horsley and Steven Friesen.

³ James 2:6-7.

⁴ There were a variety of groups in the ancient world that were formed by the poor to ensure their well-being or certain appropriate treatment for their communities, such as burial societies, where people pledged to ensure proper burial for their members by pooling their resources. See the work of Hal Taussig, New Testament biblical scholar and professor at Union Theological Seminary, for a discussion of these societies.

the responsibility of the community to ensure the well-being of those who are destitute through the specific works of “supplying their bodily needs.”

In the ancient world, supplying another’s bodily needs meant sharing resources from your own household. Most people did not have excess income from which they gave alms or assistance; any gift, would have been a sacrificial gift. Yet paired with this was a sense of reciprocity; the idea that today I’m doing OK, but tomorrow I may be in need, so giving was a way not only to ensure the well-being of others, but one’s own well-being in the future. And it was a part of covenant economics in the Jewish tradition.

Deuteronomy 15 is but one example of such covenant economics. Here, God promises that there will “be no one in need among you” assuming that all the people of Israel obey the commandments, which include the periodic cancelling of debts. But then the text acknowledges that, nonetheless it was still quite possible for people to be in need. It’s here that we find the source for Jesus’ oft quoted line “the poor will always be with you.” But note that this is not a statement of despair or resignation, but of conviction. “Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open you hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.”⁵ Faithful economic practices discussed in this chapter include the remission of debts and the setting free of slaves every seven years.

James reminds the assembly to which he writes, of their covenant obligation to care for one another’s needs suggesting that the reason some are destitute are because the rich have dragged them into court (most likely for unpaid debts which means that if these rich people are Jews, then they are not upholding their covenant promises). He redirects the people toward a different way of life together where none is more privileged than another in the assembly and all have their needs provided for.

Often in the church we adopt a charitable approach to helping “those in need,” as if we ourselves will never be in need and as if those who are in need are somehow separate from the church. When thinking about how the church can help the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, it’s easy to begin to think that the church is here on one hand and that farmworkers are here on the other. And a simple reading of James that discusses only that believers should ensure the material well-being of their poor neighbors would affirm that our role is simple charity toward the workers. But James calls upon the assembly to recognize two important things that we in the contemporary church should also keep in mind. First poor people are members of the assembly. The second: people are made poor not only through misfortune, but often by the regular actions of those with power and wealth.

For many of us whose congregations are in the neighborhoods where we live, it is likely that we attend church with people from our own socio-economic class. This can lead to a myopic view of the church that forgets that world-wide (as well as in our own country) the majority of Christians are poor! In fact in Immokalee, some of the farmworkers from Guatemala in particular, are even Presbyterian. Remembering that many men and women who are harvesting tomatoes are church-people too can remove vestiges of condescension that may linger even among the desire to do “good works.” It causes us to hear with “new ears” the CIW’s statement: we don’t want your pity, we want your partnership.

What is interesting, of course, is that within the PC(USA) we find not only poor people but wealthy people as well. We find not only those who have been pushed to the margins of

⁵ Deuteronomy 15:1-5, 11.

society's power but also those who wield enormous social, corporate, political and economic influence. And because of this, the CIW contends, that our church is playing an extremely important role as partners with the farmworkers.

Consider what Gerardo Reyes Chavez, a farmworker leader in the CIW, had to say in a letter to the PC(USA) about the key role our church plays in the Campaign for Fair Food. Chavez contends that the church "has more connections with the corporations' human side" explaining

Executives of corporations are members of congregations. And farmworkers are church people also. Your ability to connect both with executives and with farmworkers as people of faith, allowed a point of encounter between worlds that were in conflict but that were able to find, in this case through the church, a reconciliation.⁶

In our ministry and witness as a church through the Campaign for Fair Food, we condemn food systems that deliver enormous profits to corporations and cheap produce to Americans by exploiting our brothers and sisters who harvest. Unlike James, we are not pointing a finger at particular "rich people" but rather at regular systems of business that can and must be changed so that they advance human rights. Executives of corporations must be part of this new dawn of human rights in the fields if that sun is ever to rise! So we have engaged key executives, some of whom have been Presbyterian, around these issues through letter-writing, public protest, and high-level dialogue.

By walking with farmworkers, the church lends its power to farmworkers who lack rights and social standing as together we endeavor to create a food system that ensures their human rights. But this journey together has caused us to do more – it has caused us to recognize how we, as consumers, are enmeshed in a food system that continues to produce exploitation and even modern-day slavery in the fields. And not only to understand our position but to use the power we have to change the way giant retail food corporations purchase their tomatoes so that the rights and well-being of our sisters and brothers who harvest are ensured.

Sometimes, we in the church can become enamored with the power of corporations. One small change from them can dramatically affect the lives of so many people. We are comforted when we hear companies have policies and staff related to "social responsibility." We assume that they're "doing well by doing good." But many of these policies fail to ever generate substantial change. Why? For the same reason that charity is helpless to undo injustice – it's from the top down, from the initiative of the powerful to the powerless. It doesn't fundamentally change the structure of the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed. As the church we must be cautious of celebrating anything and everything called social responsibility and ask important questions. Key among them is "have the people who are supposed to be benefiting from these policies or procedures been involved in their creation and their ongoing implementation?"

The agreements that the CIW has achieved with Yum! Brands, McDonald's, Burger King, Subway, Whole Foods Market, and Bon Appétit foodservice ensure that the companies work with the CIW to

⁶ Open Letter of Thanks to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), published in Presbyterians Today, 2005.

1. Pay an additional penny per pound for tomatoes purchased to directly increase the wages of tomato pickers;
2. Implement an enforceable code of conduct to ensure safe and fair working conditions for farmworkers, including zero tolerance for modern-day slavery;
3. Ensure a voice for farmworkers in monitoring improvements and reporting abuses.

True corporate social responsibility entails more than charitable giving to local service agencies, aspirational statements about a company's belief in certain standards, or even an annual report to shareholders on conditions (while doing nothing to address problems). True corporate social responsibility must involve the corporation in repairing the damages their practices have caused, correcting the practices that caused them, and involve those people who have been principally injured in the ongoing monitoring of problems and advancing of more strenuous standards.

The agreements that the CIW has forged with giant retail food corporations have done each of these things by (a) having *the corporation* that is the greatest beneficiary of farmworker exploitation in the form of enormous profits, pay farmworkers a wage increase to materially improve their pay (b) working with farmworkers to develop new purchasing practices that will not similarly exploit workers and (c) creating an ongoing working partnership with farmworkers to address problems and continue to look for better, more just ways of doing business.

As we think about what our labor as the church has been within the Campaign for Fair Food and the road ahead as we call on the grocery and foodservice industry to similarly work with the CIW, we remember James' insistence that true faith calls us to ensure the respect and well-being of those who have been made poor within and beyond our congregation.