

Rich and Poor, Responsibility and Retribution
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
September 9, 2012
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Texts:

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

James 2:1-17

Well, for months it was the week that *would be* for Charlotte. Now it is the week that *was*, and *what* a week it was. Commentators and pundits are busy sizing up the Democratic National Convention from all angles – the political impact, the quality of the production on the stage, the many memorable speeches and our city's performance as hostess to the nation's movers and shakers.

By the majority of accounts, Charlotte acquitted itself well, even receiving rave reviews in more than a few places. Mostly, in this coming week when we remember the events of 9-11-2001, it was a safe and uneventful week. Thanks be to God.

By many accounts, it was a good week politically for the Democrats. Now it's "game on" through November 6. The party of the donkey did, however, make an ass of itself in at least one significant way. It almost left God out of its platform, its guiding policy blueprint. Party leaders from the oval office on down scrambled to amend the error. They offered varying explanations for how this might have happened but none seemed to do the job.

I fully realize that many will say quickly our national principle of separation of God and state should mean that God doesn't have to be mentioned in any political party's platform. I hear that. But, politically, the mistake created a big opening for criticism from conservative Christians. It left a blemish on an otherwise excellent week for the party of the left.

For the last two weeks, I've been preaching about the importance of reconciliation at this moment in the life of our nation and the life of the church at large. I ended that two-week series last week with this reminder that, above all, we are people of God.

We are neither Democrat nor Republican nor anything else when we sing that old gospel hymn:

"I have decided to follow Jesus. No turning back, no turning back."

My point was that we Christians should find a way to put our differences aside in the name of Christ. We have a lot of work to do to accomplish that, a LOT of work to do.

The lectionary, the weekly guide to scripture that preachers worldwide use, offers us today two scriptures that speak to an essential element of our Christian identity: namely, how we are to treat the poor. So today and next week, I will focus on these two passages, one from the Old Testament and one from the New.

We didn't hear much about the poor in these last two weeks of political conventions, did we? If we heed the words of this morning's reading in the book of Proverbs, that is nothing short of foolishness.

According to the latest data, which is now two years old, more Americans than ever are poor. Let me say that again, our nation stands at a record level of poverty. In all, 46 million Americans live on less than \$11,344 a year. That's 15.1% of the national population. Here in North Carolina, it 17.5% of us.¹

Now, picture a hungry child. Many of us don't have to use our imaginations. In just one year, 2010, a million more children like that one were added to the rolls of the poor. One out of every three poor Americans is now a child.²

Last week I shared on my blog a special article by national columnist Leonard Pitts on poverty in Charlotte and America. In it he wrote about how the story of our nation's poor is much more than just data.

“It is the job you don't get because the bus doesn't go there. It is shorting the gas bill in order to pay the rent. It is “missed-meal cramps” and going to the mall for air conditioning. It is a gnawing insufficiency that never goes away, having not enough in the land of plenty.”³

What's more, as Pitts wrote, bashing the poor seems now to have become a talking point for some politicians. One says the poor are like stray animals that ought not to be fed at the back door. Another says they are irresponsible animals. Another says the

¹ US Census Data for 2010-2011

² Childrens' Defense Fund

³ Charlotte Observer, Sept. 2, 2012

poor in America are like “scavenging raccoons.”⁴ To them, Pitts wrote, the poor are less than human.

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The ancients left us our holy scriptures not as political platforms to express their identity. They had no such democracy. Scripture expresses their understanding of who they were and whose they were.

The Book of Proverbs is among several books known as “wisdom literature,” along with the Psalms. For the ancient Hebrews, the collection of sayings known as Proverbs expressed what it meant to be a covenant people, a people who lived by the Decalogue, a people whose lives centered on two things: Loving God and loving neighbor.

Today’s reading includes these verses:

Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity,
and the rod of anger will fail.
Those who are generous are blessed,
for they share their bread with the poor. (22:8-9)

Do not rob the poor because they are poor,
or crush the afflicted at the gate;
for the LORD pleads their cause
and despoils of life those who despoil them. (22:22-23)

All of Proverbs focuses on wisdom and its opposite, foolishness. We don’t have to work too hard to get the message: any society that looks to God is to be a true covenant community, a community where belief in God is measured by belief in the common good. Anything less, Proverbs tells us, is foolishness.

To be sure, this passage doesn’t say that the rich are evil. Far from it. It does say, however, that the rich have responsibilities to others, particularly the poor. It doesn’t stop there. This Proverb states that God sides with the poor. This is a form of justice but not just any justice. Theologians call this retributive justice. That is, God’s judgment in retaliation, repayment in judgment on societies where those who have more than they need fail to care for those who don’t have enough.

⁴ Ibid

In a nation today that leads the developed world in gross income inequality, this proverb ought to get our attention. In a nation today where even modest measures to adjust these inequalities illicit frantic cries of “socialism!”, this proverb convicts us.

To leaders in particular, national and community leaders, judges and others for whom the Proverbs were specifically written, this Proverb speaks directly and without ambiguity. We are our sister’s keeper, and our brother’s, and our neighbor’s.

Church, we’ve just witnessed two political conventions made up of hours and hours of noble-sounding and carefully crafted speeches. Politicians both left and right, at every level, from across our 50 states, coordinated their messages to ensure that every major issue got addressed: foreign policy, the environment, education, the middle class, the upper class, tax policy, business regulation, women’s issues, international trade and on and on. But how many times did they speak up for the poor and the powerless? Hardly at all, hardly at all. Let us see what the coming weeks bring. But I for one don’t expect much difference.

Next week, we will come back to this subject through the lens of grace that is the New Testament: specifically, the verses we read today from James, which include this admonition: “If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food ... and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of (your faith)?” (James 2:15-16)

But let us not be in too big a hurry. For now, let us dwell on this message from the Proverbs that, in the end, when all is said and done and those who have more than they need have either shared their wealth or not ... at that point, friends, God always, always sides with the poor.

. . . . And let us pray for our nation, saying “Lord, have mercy.”

Amen.