Observations on Poverty Coverage

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**An Introduction**

On the Sojourners’’ website it states that their mission is to “articulate the biblical call to social justice, inspiring hope, and building a movement to transform individuals, communities, the church, and the world” (sojo.net). As a United Methodist social justice issues are very much a part of our tradition and I enjoyed much of what was covered and published on their site on the issue. My goal is to share the insights I have gained as well as speak to the growing disconnect between church and life outside the four walls of our places of worship-specifically, within the realm of politics. It would seem that the church has been dragged into the domestic discussion on various issues ranging from poverty and same-sex-marriage.

As pastor I know I don’t have all the answers and that many of the issues that face our country also face the local church. Entering into the travail of life issues means opening oneself up to questions that might be uncomfortable and new. While many see the role of the pastor as the leader of the church, few keep in mind that we too are human and wrestle with issues. It’s in that humility that I write from.

**The Rewrite**

In my attempt to wrestle with the disconnection between the church and the life outside, it’s important that I reference and anchor my research and reflections upon scripture. To begin I have chosen to use one of Jesus’ parable’s concerning the “Judgment of the Nations” which references the “least of these” as though they were Jesus himself (Common English Bible, Matthew 25:31-46). We must note that there are many stereotypes out there concerning the types of people living in poverty and the definition of poverty. And while Jesus never said what is poverty or who is considered impoverished, for our purposes we will use Jesus’ description of those who are hungry, thirty, someone in need of clothing, sick, or in prison.

Interestingly enough, Washington would have the public believe that it’s a “class” thing or a tax-bracket thing, and often rewrite the current situation as an attack on the middle class-as though they have it nailed down. This type of finger pointing or rewriting has left many, at least in my congregations, asking questions concerning where I stand or where I should stand as it relates to scripture and politics.

“The Line,” a Sojourners’ documentary hopes to change that dichotomy. The promoters hope that the film will “encourage voters to ask political candidates to talk more about how they would address poverty if elected” (Napp Nazworth, Documentary on Poverty Seeks to Smash Stereotypes).

Reverend Jim Wallis, the founder and President of Sojourners has his own blog called “God’s Politics” and is often quite candid about his thoughts concerning the treatment of “the least of these” (sojo.net/jim-wallis/blogs). During the Government Shutdown he went to Washington with a group of clergy and faith leaders to offer what he called a “Faithful Fillibuster”-where they read more than 2,000 passages of scripture on poverty and justice until the end of the shutdown (sojo.net/blogs/2013/10/09/faithfulfillibuster). In the blog, Jim went further on to say that “this shutdown disproportionately affects the most vulnerable in our society. So our words will not be wasted diatribes or placements of blame. Rather, we will use God’s own words…until this shutdown ends”.

Later, there was a request for a $25 donation for the purchase of a Bible for a member of Congress. Inside the Bible they were going to include a message pointing to the importance of why they, a member of congress, should personally pay attention to what God says about issues of justice for the poor and vulnerable.

When one hears about the suffering in the world and in our midst it can be a bit overwhelming. Sometimes the problems seem insurmountable and one begins to beg the question of can we even make a difference? Dr. Scott Todd from Live58 recently shared that “We used to say that 40,000 children die each day from preventable causes. In the 1990s, that number dropped to 33,000 per day. By 2008, it dropped again to 24,000. Now it is down to 21,000. That means that in a generation we cut that number in half. 1.4 billion people live in extreme poverty today. That's a staggering amount, but let's put those numbers in perspective: In 1981, 52 percent of the world lived in extreme poverty. Today it's 26 percent. Again, that means we have cut the number in half, and we did it in one generation."

Even with that bit of good news, I personally think we can do more and bring more awareness to not just our elected officials but to those in our midst that sit in the pews each Sunday oblivious of the situation or ignorant of it all.

Jesus once said that “you always have the poor with you; and whenever you want, you can do something good for them. But you won’t always have me.” and in that context it is a comment made by Jesus directed to the disciples who were upset about her lavished and “wasted” gift, but what stands out to me is the part about how we can do something good for them whenever we want or are able (Common English Bible, Mark 14:1-9). It would seem that Jesus is saying that we have lost our sense of direction as it was an obvious focus on money that led to his direct words. While it’s true that there will always be people who are in need, it’s clear that Jesus directs us to live in generosity and compassion.

In a recent article called “The Budget and Your Neighbor” we hear about the new war…the “war on the poor” (sojo.net/blogs/2013/11/01/budget-and-your-neighbor). Governor John R. Kasich made a statement saying “I’m concerned about the fact there seems to be a war on the poor” and in a very individualized and digital world where it is easy to isolate the people, the sources, and voices one listens to-it isn’t hard to imagine the filter one can use to dismiss the information and opinions of those we don’t want to listen to, follow, or even believe. This war the governor speaks of it one of information but is also one of the heart.

I would be lying if I didn’t say that the Government Shutdown wasn’t discouraging and sad-not just on a political/Washington level, but on a personal and leadership level. When one considers our current political climate and our culture in regards to what many are experiencing-specifically, the least of these, it hits home in small town middle America. And yet, in the midst of my frustration and sadness I am reminded of the saving grace.

In a blog called “Saving Faith,” Jim recalls how Sojourners began saying “we were a little group made up of two kinds of people — those who had just come to faith from the student movements of our time and the counterculture of the 60s and 70s, and those who had grown up conservative evangelicals and had become deeply frustrated with the lack of attention to the fundamental issues of justice and peace” (sojo.net/blogs/2013/10/31/saving-faith). He went on further to say that their first issue was “meant to *evangelize* to those in our generation who wanted to change the world — and to help *save faith* for many who were losing it because their churches didn’t seem to care.”

In closing, I truly believe that the issues we face today have somehow weaved themselves into the very fabric of the Christian life. The question of “What Would Jesus Do” isn’t as clear for many because politics has blurred the lines between issues of man and the issues between man and God. Sadly, the issues between man and God aren’t the same as the issues man has gummed up in relationship to the treatment of the least of these.

I personally will continue to check out the Sojourners’ website on a regular basis as I find it insightful and helpful. And while I wasn’t able to connect the dots as neatly as I had hoped, it seems fitting that my haphazard style correlates with how the world seems to interact and wrestle with both God and neighbor (Common English Bible, Micah 6:8, Luke 10:25-37).