

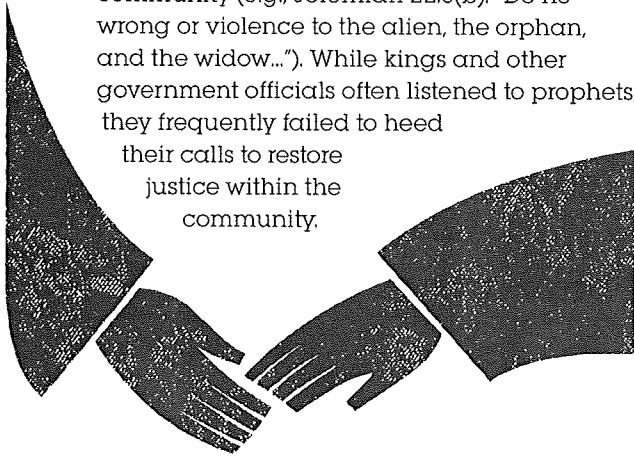
Ministry with the poor is being in right relationship with God and neighbor, and deepens our knowledge and love of God, neighbor, and self.

Biblical Readings:

Jeremiah 22:1, 3, 13, 15-16; Jeremiah 7:1-7, 10-11; Luke 16:19-31; Isaiah 1:2-3; Isaiah 58:10-11; Matthew 22:34-40; 25:31-46; Luke 19:1-10

REFLECTION

The prophets used the phrase, "Thus says the Lord," to make pronouncements from God on how to act justly so as to fulfill the covenant to love God and neighbor. For the prophets, justice demanded protecting the most vulnerable and mistreated in a community (e.g., Jeremiah 22:3(b): "Do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow..."). While kings and other government officials often listened to prophets, they frequently failed to heed their calls to restore justice within the community.



In the 22nd chapter of Jeremiah, the king and other political and religious leaders failed to live out their covenant obligation to love and serve their poorest citizens and neighbors. In so doing, they failed to know and love God. God instructed Jeremiah to "Go down to the house of the king" (Jeremiah 22:1). In other words, take this message directly to the halls of power.

At the heart of Jeremiah's indictment stood a broken relationship between government

leaders, the people, and God. The government had stopped being responsive to "the cause of the poor and needy" (22:16). In delivering this message, Jeremiah contrasted the unjust actions of the current king's administration "who makes his neighbors work for nothing" (22:13) with the just practices of the previous king's administration saying, "Did not your father...do justice and righteousness" (22:15)?

When the prior king "judged the cause of the poor and needy," he was in right relationship, not only with the poor and needy, but also with God (Jeremiah 22:16). And "then it was well" (22:16). In fact, God said, "Is not this to know me" (22:16)? Stated positively, Jeremiah's message from God is that we know God by being in right relationship with the poor and by responding to the needs of the poor as a matter of top priority.

Through Jeremiah, God also challenged the household of faith: "Stand in the gate of the Lord's house, and proclaim there this word...if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow...then I will dwell with you in this place" (Jeremiah 7:1, 5-7). But when a faith community kept mistreating workers and ignoring the needs of the vulnerable, then, Jeremiah warned, God will not dwell in a house that has "become a den of robbers" (7:11).



“And can you afford to waste your Lord’s goods? This affording to rob God is the very cant of hell. Do not you know that God entrusted you with that money (all above what buys necessities for your families) to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to help the stranger, the widow, the fatherless; and indeed, as far as it will go, to relieve the wants of all mankind? How can you, how dare you, defraud your Lord, by applying it to any other purpose?”

— John Wesley’s sermon, “On the Danger of Increasing Riches,” September 21, 1790

The book of Isaiah begins with a stinging rebuke from God: “I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner and the donkey its master’s crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand” (Isaiah 1:2-3). In chapter after chapter, Isaiah pleads with people to share their resources to meet the needs of the poor so that all might be blessed: “If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted...The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs...” (58:10-11).

But poverty involves more than a lack of adequate resources; and ministry with the poor involves more than providing resources to those who lack them. The accumulation of wealth by a few at the expense of many not only crushes the lives of the poor but creates a blinding barrier between the wealthy and God, and between the wealthy and their impoverished neighbors. (See Luke 16:19-31.) The prophets call us to account for the unjust, unhealthy relationships that divide God’s children from one another. The violent language of the prophets mirrors the violence of God’s family being torn apart by a widening gap between rich and poor. Today the gap between rich and poor in the United States is wider than ever.

In the tradition of the prophets, Jesus and his disciples proclaim a message of love and justice where love of God depends upon living in just relationships, especially with the impoverished and marginalized. (See Matthew 22:34-40; 25:31-46.) Just relationships build upon mutual respect, fairness, and equality.

The New Testament story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10) illustrates how his getting to know God was related to Zacchaeus’ transforming his relationship with the poor. Zacchaeus, a corrupt, local tax official, had unjustly enriched himself at the expense of many families in his community. When Jesus came to town, Zacchaeus climbed up a tree to see him, staying above, and separating himself from the crowd. Jesus spotted Zacchaeus up in the tree and set in motion the following: First, Jesus insisted that the rich man get down from his position of privilege to be with him (Luke 19:5). Doing that meant that Zacchaeus would have to get down into a crowd of the very people he had cheated and robbed. Second, Jesus honored Zacchaeus in front of that crowd by saying, “I must stay at your house today” (19:5). Zacchaeus had resources and Jesus was a homeless traveler in need of hospitality. Third, when Zacchaeus came down and joined Jesus with the crowd, it set the stage for both Zacchaeus and the crowd to transform their unjust relations.

At first the crowd of people Zacchaeus had preyed upon grumbled. But Zacchaeus, now on the same level as everyone else, immediately offered to redistribute resources among the whole crowd in an equitable and just manner: “Half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much” (Luke 19:8). Only when Zacchaeus had repented by promising to make restitution, divest himself of ill-gotten gains, and reconcile himself with the very neighbors he had cheated and impoverished did Jesus celebrate that Zacchaeus had come to know God: “Today salvation has come to this house” (19:9).

Questions for Discussion and Action:

- What might Jeremiah say to today's political, economic, and religious leaders about justice, righteousness, and the needs of the poor? What public policies need to change so that our society can better judge and respond to the cause of the poor, the orphan, the widow, and the alien?
- Are there ways your local congregation is with its impoverished neighbors (like Zacchaeus coming down from the tree)?
- The United Methodist Social Principles state: "To begin to alleviate poverty, we support such policies as: adequate income maintenance, quality education, decent housing, job training, meaningful employment opportunities, adequate medical and hospital care, humanization and radical revisions of welfare programs, work for peace in conflict areas and efforts to protect creation's integrity. Since low wages are often a cause of poverty, employers should pay their employees a wage that does not require them to depend upon government subsidies such as food stamps or welfare for their livelihood" (Paragraph 163E). To what extent are policies like these in place in your community? In what ways might your church support adoption of these policies by the government and employers?



Prayer:

Open our hands, wounded Savior, into the hands of a hurting neighbor. For in their hands we together feel the healing touch of your pierced hands. Guide our feet to halls of power that we may speak the truth there. For it is in standing up with any who are marginalized that we stand with you. It is in embracing others in the work for justice that we are embraced by you. Amen.

