

Forward Together Hermeneutic

An Interpretive Lens through which to Address the Injustice of the Day

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In part, the Forward Together Lectionary is put together with a hermeneutic, or “an interpretive lens” that emphasizes the intersection of the Divine and the human. This is not to say that God has been replaced at the center by human beings; but instead to say that the reading of Scripture that undergirds this lectionary is built on the fact that God has formed us to bear God’s image and has invested us with God’s own breath, making us as human beings the recipients of something inherently sacred. We are not God, the center of the story; but we are “God bearers,” those who are special because of God’s investiture in us! In this regard, several key points can be raised about the way that the Lectionary seeks to present the texts it examines:

- 1) **It emphasizes that God cares deeply for human beings and the way that we treat each other. In fact, the proper treatment of human beings is often raised to the level of a religious duty.**

³“Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you

do not notice?” Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers.

⁴ Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.

⁵ Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?

⁶ Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
(Isa 58:3-7 NRS)

In this passage, we can see clearly that God is not concerned to have fasts and acts of contrition as part of worship. No, God sought justice from the people for those who had been held in bondage, oppressed,

hungry, homeless, naked, and needy. God defined this as the acceptable fast; this is the “religious obligation” that the Lord desired, that they care for the needs of people around them. This is a theme to which we will return several times in the next few minutes.

In part, I see this tied to the concept of the “image of God” which God has vested in each of us. There is something sacred in each human being, vested in us by the “image of God.” Because of this image, we are special and we deserve to be treated in just ways. This essential notion conveys value to each of us as human beings, a value that is not hampered by our race, our ethnicity, our gender, our nationality, our sexual orientation, our religious beliefs, or even our lack thereof! To paraphrase Dr. King, “Every human being is a child of God made in God’s image and therefore deserves to be treated as such.” It is in part because of this essential truth that the Forward Together Lectionary came to be.

2. **It demonstrates that the way that we treat each other is indicative of our concern and affection for God.**

³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world;
³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me

something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,

³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'

³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?

³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?

³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'

⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

(Mat 25:34-40 NRS)

This passage more than any other has possessed me and motivated me to bear witness in Raleigh over the course of the first 13 Moral Mondays. In part it has done so because it speaks of concerns that are immediately relevant to addressing the immoral and extreme legislation emanating from our General Assembly and Governor’s Mansion; things like:

-170,000 hungry unemployed people,

-thirsty people whose water has been threaten with contamination by fracking,

-aliens, regardless of their status,
whom we have failed to welcome,

-vulnerable people who are naked-
exposed to unjust laws that
disenfranchise them of their votes
and rob them of their God-ordained
rights,

-500,000 poor and potentially sick
people denied access to federally
funded Medicaid benefits,

-and prisoners who have been denied
the “Racial justice act”

The causes that motivated the formation of this movement are all lifted straight from this passage. But this passage is also significant because it declares that the way that we treat those whom we view as “least” among us, is the way that we treat God, for God is manifest in each of them and how we treat them really defines our character as people and as a state.

3. It reminds us that we have a “religious” obligation to seek justice on behalf of those for whom justice has been denied.

²¹ I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

²² Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them;

and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon.

²³ Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

²⁴ But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amo 5:21-24 NRS)

This passage is often a wakeup call for many of us who, as Dr. King says, “hide behind the anesthetizing silence of stained glass windows.” It is a reminder that we do not fulfill what God has called us to do in the pretty buildings where we teach and preach and praise God each week. This passage is particularly harsh because God uses such damning language as relates to the stuff of worship. “I hate you festivals!” “I will not accept your offerings!” “I will not listen to your songs!” This is a harsh indictment of our standard modes of worship.

This passage is a reminder that we far too often get things twisted! We tend to do those familiar easy things that we think God wants but forget to do those things that God said that God wants! God wants flowing justice! God demands streams of righteousness! God’s concerns are not met by a life of rituals and regalia, the pageantry of what we do within the four walls on Friday evening, Saturday morning, or Sunday morning! No, God is calling on us

to move our activity from the realm “ritual” to the realm “reality!”

In part, this passage pushes us to see that God really is concerned with the real life needs of real people in the real world. This is what God calls us to engage in! Justice is what God calls us to do. By doing justice, we are doing God’s work; justice doing is our religious duty! This does not mean that praise and worship is not important; it means that it is not all important. We need to move our congregations beyond a faith that believes our chief concern is “to praise God” if by “praise” it only means songs and sacrifices in the sanctuary. Praise is what we do with our hands and our feet as we bring God’s justice to an unjust world! We are called to remind our people that justice is our “religious” duty!

4. It emphasizes that this obligation extends from God, to government (king), to general public, so that everybody is called to participate.

¹⁰ Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!

¹¹ What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do

not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.

¹² When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more;

¹³ bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and calling of convocation-- I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.

¹⁴ Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them.

¹⁵ When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.

¹⁶ Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil,

¹⁷ learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. (Isa 1:10-17 NRS)

One of the misconceptions that we often have about the role of justice in society is that justice is someone else’s responsibility. In this regard, the people can say that justice is the government’s responsibility and feel as though they have been relieved of obligation. The government can argue that it’s the churches’, synagogues’, mosques’, and 501 c 3s’ obligation and feel as though they have been relieved of their obligation. Religious organizations can suggest that it is the people’s responsibility and feel as

though they are relieved of their obligation to act. But the truth is, justice is all of our responsibility; we each have a role to play.

We can see in this passage that the Temple, the chief location of sacrifices and offerings and the rituals of praise, is not excused; nor are the people, nor is the government and its officials. God holds everybody accountable to do what they can to enact justice, to rescue the oppressed, to defend the orphans, to plead for the widows. These groups denoting “social vulnerability” in ancient Judah have corollaries in our society as well for we still have oppressed minorities, disadvantaged elderly, disempowered immigrants, disenfranchised impoverished folk, as well as hosts of fatherless children and single mother heads of households. God still wants us all to bring Justice to these vulnerable people!

In a system like ours we all have a role to play as well and we religious leaders are to call all of society to accountability, reminding them both of God’s perspective on our mutual obligation and of God’s concern for those most vulnerable among us all. Some have said the obligation has changed in our democratic society, relieving the burden from the government because the government is not the king of old, called to fulfill God’s will. But we need to clarify that we are a representative government, thus, “we the people” are the government! Any charge that falls on us as individuals is amplified on us collectively as we act together. So our society cannot care for the

needs of the neediest among us with simple acts of individual charity; we are called to leverage our collective power as the government (and as corporations, and as religious bodies, and as civic organizations, and as whatever other collective groups we happen to form) to enact God’s justice in this world!

One other point that this passage like the last passage we investigated makes, we cannot imagine that our God is more concerned with ritual than righteousness! We cannot busy ourselves with what happens in the sanctuary and pretend that we have done what God said to do! We as religious people and as leaders of religious communities cannot deceive ourselves into believing that we have done “what does the Lord require of us” by focusing on praise and worship in our churches, synagogues, mosques, and meeting houses! I am tired of hearing, “I would come out to bear witness, but I am busy planning another service, or handling congregational business, or doing the work of the Lord!” True worship is working for justice in the world! This IS what God called us to do! This is the work of the LORD! We cannot keep our God locked in our houses of worship. We must introduce our God, our God’s Word, and our God’s Will to our world and then do the work to make our world change!

5. It declares that this obligation is not optional, it is imperative and consequential!

⁴¹ Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels;

⁴² for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink,

⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'

⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?'

⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'

⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." (Mat 25:41-1 NRS)

Though we like the first part of this passage that promises the nations eternal life for caring for the King as he was embodied in the least, the lost, and the otherwise left out, we tend to overlook the last few verses. Here we have a much more disturbing word! Here the message is that what we don't do has consequences, too!

I want to lift this up as a separate passage for a moment to remind us that God's call for

justice is not optional...it is wholly consequential. Jesus himself frames the criteria for eternal life based on whether or not people engage in acts of justice. If we think of this as a judgment of nations, i.e. collective governmental organizations, then how would our society be judged? When we look at the legislation that has come down the pike in the last few months...I worry that our judgment would not be with those on the right! Such policies have increased the unemployed's hunger, compromised the water of the thirsty, refused to hear the concerns of the strangers, disenfranchised the vulnerable naked, removed the option for Medicaid for the sick, and further hurt the cause of the imprisoned. How do you think we will be judged?

Dr. Barber has spoken of this struggle as a battle for the "soul of North Carolina." That is precisely what it is...and I am worried about the state of our collective soul. These policies that have come out are in direct opposition to what God called for from us and we need to note the consequential nature of policy decisions. How we legislate says something about who we are and how we will be judged! Justice is not an option!

One more point that I would make is something that my religious life teacher in my Quaker high school told me years ago. He talked about the abuses of capital punishment, how it disproportionately impacts blacks and minorities, how it is applied differently in different states, how it has even been wrongly used taking the lives of innocent people. Then he asked the class who was in favor of capital punishment. No one in the class raised their hand. After that,

he asked, "Then what are you doing to prevent it?" When no one in the class could offer anything that we had done he said; "You must vigorously resist an unjust system, or you are complicit in its crimes!" So I say to each of us here today as we look at what is going on in our state, "We must vigorously, fervently resist this unjust system, or we are all complicit in its crimes!"

Holocaust survivor and 1986 Nobel Prize laureate said it somewhat differently. In his challenge to the complacency that allowed the murder of millions of Jews and others he declares:

"We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim... . Action is the only remedy to indifference, the most insidious danger of all." (Elie Wiesel, *Night*)

We cannot afford to be neutral in this state at this day and age! We must side with Justice! We must oppose systems that abuse the vulnerable! We must pick a side or by our neutrality we passively side with the unjust status quo! In the battle for the soul of North Carolina, we as religious leaders, we as people of conscience must take sides!

6. It invites us to be coworkers with God in the bringing of the Kingdom/the repair of the world.

¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the

name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Mat 28:19-20 NRS)

We have work to do. We cannot sit this struggle out! We cannot sit on the sidelines of this fight. We all have our role to play in joining our work with God's. I want to make sure I emphasize this point. We do not engage in the struggle for justice alone... it is first and foremost God's work.

In ancient Israel, it was not only the king's and the people's responsibility to ensure that justice was done, it was also the LORD's. God was the chief entity responsible for ensuring that the needs of all of God's people were met; it was into this work that God invited the king, the officials, and the people. God is always and already at work to ensure justice in this world. God's word is replete with the requisite imperatives to motivate us to act and giving us the vision of what justice can look like in the here and now. God's Spirit rests upon each of us, empowering us to do "greater things than these" if we just believe. God's actions are not the issue! The question is, will we act?

Will we act and join our work with God's work to bring about justice in this world? I have often wondered what if on that "great getting' up mornin'" God said to me,

-that the reason that there were hungry people in this world was because I failed to share my bread;

-that the reason their were sick people in this world, is because I failed to tend to their needs;

-that the reason the immigrants struggled for rights and dignity, is because I failed to welcome them;

-that the reason that there were homeless people dying in our streets, is because I failed to shelter them in my home;

What if God said to me that the reason for the vast suffering in this world, is because we failed to act?

Perhaps Dr. King said it best:

We must come to see that human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of men willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard wor(k) time itself becomes an ally of the forces of stagnation. (*Hope*, 296)

Dr. King rightly noted that we are not here to be spectators in the work of justice and equality. We are here to be “co-workers with God!” We are to partner our efforts with what God has already done, to live into the power of the Spirit’s inward working,

and to express that power on the outside!

What if the reason that injustice persists is not because we are waiting on God; but because God is waiting on you? What if it is because God is waiting on us?

Dr. King’s notion of being co-workers with God to bring about justice finds a corollary in Judaism in the theology of Rabbi Michael Lerner. Rabbi Lerner notes that our world is broken. He emphasizes the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam* and suggests that we need to work with God to repair what has been broken in our world. Perhaps we as Jews, as Christians, as Muslims, as all people of faith, need to recognize the important role that we play in *tikkun olam* as we repair the breaches of a world that tends towards injustice by expressing our faith in action in partnership with our God!

Conclusion

Every one of the texts that we have explored today and that we explore in the Forward Together Lectionary deals with some if not all of the above 6 points. These points are reflected in so many different contexts throughout the entire corpus of the Bible, it is essential that we explore this interpretive lens and use it as a counter to the lenses of the Prosperity gospel that Jesus died to make us rich, the mainline notion of a faith void of “works” that leaves believers passive, and the Evangelical notion that we are to wait on the imminent end of time for the in-breaking of Christ to foster social transformation that

makes action irrelevant. Instead we offer that we are to partner our work with God's own in a larger common effort to usher in the Kingdom of God which though it is already among us is in part awaiting our joining God's work for it to be manifest in the world.

So, the 6 hermeneutical principles of the Forward Together Lectionary are:

1) It emphasizes that God cares deeply for human beings and the way that we treat each other. In fact, the proper treatment of human beings is raised to the level of a religious duty.

2) The way that we treat each other is indicative of our concern and affection for God.

3) We have a "religious" obligation to seek justice on behalf of those for whom justice has been denied.

4) This obligation to bring justice extends from God, to government (king), to general public, so that everybody is called to participate.

5) This obligation to bring justice is not optional, it is imperative and consequential!

6) We are coworkers with God in the bringing of the Kingdom/the repair of the world.