

# The Forward Together Lectionary



Wrestling with the Crises in our State  
Through Scriptural and Theological Lenses

## Introduction to the Forward Together Lectionary

The policies that have been advanced by the NC General Assembly are both extreme and immoral, but they are not new. They reflect human practices of oppression and humiliation that are as old as human society itself. In their attempt to limit access to power to the hands of a select few, to undermine public services and public response to the needs of the most vulnerable, and to generally establish a system of inequality, the current GA agenda resembles that which God decries throughout the Scriptures. It is in this regard that this lectionary has been composed. It is an attempt to provide the context for a response to the issues of the day in the Scriptures that are key to many believing communities.

One cannot look at the Bible and explore its pages without becoming acutely aware that God is greatly concerned for justice in human communities. Most clergy will acknowledge this in relation to the works of the prophets; the prophets speak consistently and repeatedly about notions of interpersonal and societal justice. But the truth is that it is not only the prophetic texts that have this concern. Every section of the Bible addresses justice in some form or fashion. Whether it be the destruction of Sodom in Genesis for its abuse of vulnerable travelers, or the liberation of the enslaved Hebrews in Exodus, or the instructions about the proper care for widows, orphans, the poor, and aliens in Deuteronomy, or the countless narratives about God's actions to ensure justice in the Deuteronomic History, or the persistent entreaties for God's justice in the Psalter, or the manifold attempts to find fault with the

protagonist's actions toward the poor in Job, the Hebrew Bible is replete with discussions of God's call for social justice.

In fact, the entire narrative of the Hebrew Bible tells the story of God's attempt to create a community wherein Justice reigned, where everyone had land from which to subsist, where everyone had a right to argue their case at the city gate, where judges did not take bribes or honor the socially powerful, where all scales were balanced and boundary stones fixed, and where those who fell through the cracks were protected by God. Even promises of a Messiah and the impending "Day of YHWH" are predicated on the notion of God's work to bring justice long delayed into being in this world.

These messages, however, are not limited to the Hebrew Bible. The Christian Testament addresses notions of God's justice incarnate in a Messiah who heals the sick, feeds the hungry, welcomes the outcast, and brings "good news to the poor" of the advent of the Kingdom of God where the justice that is a part of God's will is done "on earth as it is in Heaven." The Gospels are followed by narratives of early Christian community where all goods were shared and all needs met in Acts, where men and women, enslaved and enslavers, Jews and Gentiles were deemed "one" in Galatians, where religion was summed up as caring for orphans and widows in James, and where we are called to Love our sisters and brothers if we claim to Love God in 1 John. The entire concept of apocalyptic which drives so much of the Christian Testament is tied to notions of justice denied in this world

being fulfilled at God's in-breaking into our time and space to fix what we have broken and to make right what we have corrupted. Thus, it can rightly be said, that the entire corpus of the Hebrew and Christian Testaments is focused on justice!

That said, sermons on justice that address the constant cry in Scripture to tend to the needs of single mothers, fatherless children, immigrants (regardless of their status), the sick, the afflicted, the oppressed, the incarcerated, and the poor in our times are few and far between. As a result people have frequently imagined the message of God to be a solely spiritual concern and forgotten that God's word was intended to transform *this* world and not just offer us benefits in the next. It is for this reason that this brief lectionary was created, to serve as a reminder of what it was that God really said, over and over and over again about justice being done in *this* world and to provide a context from where sermons and lesson plans can be developed by religious leaders to address justice issues with their congregants.

In this brief lectionary you will find 5 focal passages with exegetical/theological and reflective information about the texts. In its pages, we will address Genesis 1:26-27 (Focus: the

importance of the image of God for establishing just relationships), 1 Samuel 8:11- 17 (Focus: the need for prophets to balance kingly/governmental power), Isaiah 1:10-17 (Focus: determining what is it that God calls for from believing communities); Matthew 25:31-46 (Focus: the way we treat vulnerable Others is the way we treat God); and Acts 2:43-47 (Focus: an example of a just and diverse community). Though far from offering thorough commentaries on these texts, we hope that these readings will provide a basis for faith communities to begin discussions about what it is that God requires and how to begin to move our state, our nation, and our world in that direction.

This work, though the product of the immediate labors of Dr. Rodney Sadler, Dr. William Turner, and Dr. Peter Wherry, is born of the contemporary theological engagements of many of our state's religious leaders and Dr. William Barber's constant challenge to us all to view the current crises in North Carolina's political arena through theological and scriptural lenses. Special thanks are due to Dr. Cardis Brown and Rev. Kojo Nantambu for their work to organize North Carolina's religious leaders and to foster this project.

## Gen 1:26-27 NRS

### *Betsalem Elohim: In the Image of God*

<sup>26</sup> Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

<sup>27</sup> So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

One of the most poignant passages in all of Scripture for addressing human rights comes in the first chapter of the first book of the Judeo-Christian biblical texts. It is two verses from the initial Priestly Writer's Creation narrative in Genesis 1:1-2:4a. In this brief account, the omniscient narrator there describes the creation of humankind, or *haadam*. This term, *haadam* is a fascinating term since it is not really a reference to a personal name or a "man" in this story. Instead it is a reference to an idealized form of humanity from which all of the rest of humanity is eventually derived. It is a humanity that contains the origins not of a male, but of both the male and the female, expressing their common origins in a way that is neither hierarchical nor expressly patriarchal; no, the passage is decidedly egalitarian as it grounds the origins of both genders in God's initial creative activity.

At the beginning of this account, God proclaims to the otherwise unnamed divine witnesses, "Let us make *haadam* in our image." The Hebrew phrase defining what this means occurs later in the second clause of v.27 as God says that

*haadam* is created "*betsalem elohim*" or "in the image of God." This powerful symbolic statement gives extraordinary relevance to the human creation, for it is the only aspect of Creation that is so designated and so defined. This same notion recurs in Gen 9:6 where the taking of human life by another human being is decried on the basis that human beings are created in God's image. This phrase is ambiguous in meaning, not clearly suggesting if the image is figurative (a symbolic likeness of), formal (expressing the contours or shape of), literal (a model or "look-a-like" to), essential (expressing the essence of), moral (reflecting the ethos of), intellectual (containing the intelligence of) God. Yet in its ambiguity the term finds even greater potency as it forces us to ponder what this *tselem* or "image" we have in common with God might be.

Thus, it becomes clear that the notion of humanity being created in God's image instills a special value in human beings, a value that even God celebrates, for humans seem to be distinctly worthy of consideration not given to other creatures in the earthly realm. Because we are

created *betselem elohim* our lives are valuable; there is something divine instilled in our being from the instance of our creation; there is an aspect of divinity that elevates humanity, making us special to God, making us special to each other.

As we consider preaching from this narrative, several points stand out as pertinent:

- 1) As we consider the a policies enacted by the General Assembly, policies that undermine voting rights, attack women's rights, hamper education, and remove the safety net upon which many poor North Carolinians subsist, are these consistent with the way that we should treat those who are valuable because they are reflections of the image of God?
- 2) The universal nature of these two verses should not be overlooked. This passage considers a time before there were human divisions of races or religions and when there was no concern for dogma or difference. In this way, it can speak to a diverse crowd of people from disparate backgrounds identifying what is common to us all. We all are made, *betselem elohim*, and therefore we are all worthy of consideration and concern.
- 3) If we consider the diversity of people who are part of the Forward Together Movement and who attend Moral Mondays, we can note the power of the sanctity of humanity in which they revel. They come together despite differences in color, class, and creed because they find their commonality in the *imago Dei* that unites them all together as one. Indeed, it is that common divine image that we share that enables us, despite the different issues and concerns we each bring to the table, to move forward together, for we really are just one image, just one likeness, just one essence, reflecting just one God...we really are just one.
- 4) How can we as a state develop policies that reflect the importance of each individual as those made in God's image? What would such policies that respect an aspect of divinity in each human being look like? This is an opportunity for us to engage in the kind of vision casting that imagines a world worthy of God's image and seeks to formulate policies consistent with this notion of the fundamental nature of humanity.

## Isa 1:10-17 NRS

### **“Who Asked this from Your Hand?” Doing Justice as Worshipping God**

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

<sup>11</sup> 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.

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

<sup>13</sup> 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.

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

<sup>15</sup> 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.

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

<sup>17</sup> learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

For some of our congregations, conversations about social justice are difficult to foster because they inevitably appear to the people in the pews to be more about politics than they are about religion. As such, discussions about social justice often appear to too many to be distractions from God’s primary concern that we are to focus our attention on acts of worship and piety. This division, firmly fixed in the minds of contemporary believers is, however, quite distinct from the concerns of our God as evidenced in Scripture. For example, if we look at Isaiah 1:10-17 we get a glimpse of what it is that God cares about. This is not by accident; it represents a particular theology [or ideology] that needs to be identified.

In this passage we confront an angry YHWH who appears to be rejecting the standard cultic expressions of faith like sacrifice, offerings, burning incense, celebrations of holy days, and “solemn assemblies.” The very things that appeared to be at the heart of the ancient Hebrew religious tradition are deemed “abomination,” “futile,” and things that YHWH “hates.” These practices done to appease YHWH seem instead to be enraging Judah’s God, who asks “What are these things to me?”

Many try to ease the sting of these words by suggesting that there was some problem with the people’s religious practices, that the people were not performing these acts of devotion, supplication, and contrition correctly and

that they thereby angered their God. But a close reading of this passage offers no clear sense that they were doing any of these rituals wrongly...it just appears that *the Lord did not want them.*

Contemporary believers might try to distance ourselves from the problematic nature of this text by consoling ourselves with the thought that sacrifices and offerings are the remnant of ancient practices in which we have no part. In this regard, v.15 is a most troubling portion of this pericope [section of text] because it suggests that *God will not listen to the prayers of the people.* Though we may not participate in the cultic activities of old, *we do pray*, and to hear that God refused to look on the people's outstretched hands and to hear their heartfelt prayers is something that strikes at the heart of all believers.

And this message is not limited to this passage either, for Amos 5:21-24 echoes the sentiments of this passage with God rejecting festivals, offerings, and worship songs. Similarly Micah 6:6-8 notes that sacrificial offerings, even of the most extreme variety are of no concern for our Lord. Instead, in each of these passages, God desires "justice." The Hebrew term used for justice in each of these prophetic utterances is *mishpat*, a term that relates to forensic judgment enacted by judges who seek to restore balance in imbalanced situations. God's concern is that without *mishpat* the rights of the vulnerable will likely be overlooked and the needs of the needy will likely go

unmet. So, the ritual of worship is rejected and God's desire is recast in these various prophetic pronouncements as a concern that the socially marginalized will be adequately cared for by the people of and at all levels of power in Judah.

Isaiah 1:10-17, like Amos 5:21-24 and Micah 6:6-8, is a rich pericope that offers a wonderful context wherein we can consider God's perspective on the extreme and immoral policies of the NCGA and governor. It also can inaugurate a conversation about what it is that God has called us to do as believers, reminding our congregants that our faith is not just about what we do on our days of devotion, but how we treat matters of justice every day. In this regard, it can serve as a basis for a larger conversation about how religious communities should respond to regressive legislation that will hurt the people of our state, moving these issues from the periphery to the center of our theological discourse.

Three other points are offered for consideration:

- 1) The comparison with Sodom and Gomorrah at the outset of this passage is telling. It brings to mind the imagery of Ezekiel 16:44-50. There in verse 49 we have the following passage: "49 This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and

needy.” (Eze 16:49 NRS) In this regard, it is clear that the comparison is intended to evoke the injustice of Sodom where the people’s haughtiness, pride, and ease allowed them to become lax about fulfilling the dictates of social justice. Such a comparison with our own congregations and, indeed, with our own state today may well be merited. Have we become the new Sodom?

- 2) The three pericopes mentioned above may well be read together as a dialogue between God and humanity with the ending verses of each pericope read together to emphasize God’s repetitive, yet often ignored charge that we all care for the needs of the needy in our midst. <sup>24</sup> But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amo 5:24 NRS); <sup>16</sup> Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, <sup>17</sup> learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed,

defend the orphan, plead for the widow. (Isa 1:16-17 NRS)l <sup>8</sup> He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Mic 6:8 NRS) This common and coordinated response from God uniting the ends of these three prophetic utterances reveal what it really is that God wanted and wants from human communities!

- 3) These pericopes can also serve as a backdrop for a conversation reframing what it is that we are about as religious communities. In this regard, how do we evidence God’s concern for justice? What are our congregations doing to ensure that justice is done in our contexts today? How does the Forward Together movement enable us to respond to God’s prophetic call in a contextually relevant way in light of the extreme and immoral policies being promulgated by our General Assembly and our Governor?



## 1Sa 8:10-20 NRS

### Prophetic Rebuttal to the Abuse of Governing Power

<sup>10</sup> So Samuel reported all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king.

<sup>11</sup> He said, "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots;

<sup>12</sup> and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots.

<sup>13</sup> He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers.

<sup>14</sup> He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers.

<sup>15</sup> He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers.

<sup>16</sup> He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work.

<sup>17</sup> He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves.

<sup>18</sup> And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the LORD will not answer you in that day."

<sup>19</sup> But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, "No! but we are determined to have a king over us,

<sup>20</sup> so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles."

This might not be the first passage to which people would turn if they were to think about preaching sermons on social justice, or even about preaching sermons that address the current crisis in this state; but this pericope in 1 Samuel 8:10-20 is both powerful and poignant for addressing many of the concerns of this critical juncture. The context is the call of the Israelites for a king and what takes place in the aftermath of that call. Samuel initially feels the sting of the people's request for a king to rule over them. He sees it as a rejection of his own leadership as the last judge over the people (see v.

6). But YHWH assures him that it is not him that the people have rejected; it is YHWH who they have rejected as King over them (v.7).

In place of YHWH's kingship, the people wanted to have a human king who would help them to be *kechol hagoyim*, or "like other nations." To the Hebrew reader of the text, this would not just represent their ambition to have the full benefits of nationhood like their neighbors around them. This would be the rejection of a divine ideal of Yahwistic kingship in order that they might replicate the behavior and

adopt the ethos of the *goyim* or “gentiles” whose behavior historically has been rejected by their God.

It is in this context that Samuel offers his prophecy that dominates the pericope. He prophesies about the dangers of kingship and the impact that the king will have on the people. Evident throughout are expressions of kingly power that would serve to undermine the egalitarian ideal of a state with no ruling hegemony and a nation of equal citizens whose access to land ownership ensured them all that they could all subsist in the Promised Land.

Kingship, according to YHWH, threatened this ideal and imperiled the people with the imposition of taxation, slave labor, a standing military, a government enforced corvee system of imposed service to the state, and the development of a ruling class. In the midst of this all we have a series of verbs suggesting the nature of monarchical “taking” and “giving.” In a reverse Robin Hood manner, the King is described as one who will take from the common people and give to himself and his cadre of ruling elites. This taking and self-giving culminates in v.17 with the climatic statement that the people “shall be his slaves.” (1Sa 8:17 NRS) The heart of Samuel’s message is that the activity of a king will be a regressive action, taking them back to their status in Egypt, the status from which they cried out to YHWH for liberation from their oppression.

There are several points from this passage that may prove useful for sermonic or lesson plan development:

- 1) This story exemplifies the contrast between the role of the prophet and the role of the king. In the narratives that follow this in the Deuteronomic Historian’s work (Joshua-2<sup>nd</sup> Kings), we will begin to see the way Samuel’s prophetic utterance in this pericope comes true. In essence, kingship becomes a source of the fall of the people and their subsequent loss of the Promised Land. In our contexts, the unfettered power of the state government agencies dominated by a single party that is driven by an elitist agenda that disregards the needs of common citizens may well be a source of our collective undoing.
- 2) In this vein, this story becomes the origin of the prophetic role in the Deuteronomic Historian’s work; the prophet is the one who speaks God’s truth to the dangerous and nearly boundless power of kings. Concurring with Lord Acton’s later assessment, prophets are the counterpoint to the truism that “Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely!” The prophet is the one who speaks God’s truth against otherwise unfettered human power and reminds the “king” that the Lord is watching

and that God desires justice for all of God's people.

- 3) The origin of the prophetic role can be found in this initial juxtaposition of predicted kingly authority and the prophetic pronouncement of God's will and God's word. It is this prophetic role that is called for from clergy and believing communities faced with the extreme, immoral, and seemingly absolute power of the ALEC driven conservative coalition in NC's General Assembly and Governor's Mansion. Like Samuel, we too are called to pronounce a prophetic rebuttal to the regressive and corrupt expressions of power that afflict the people and seek to take them back to a former status of oppression and despair.

- 4) In part the "good news" of this passage can be found in the return

to the Kingship of God or the Kingdom of God or the Reign of God over our hearts and minds and over our vision of public policy. If we surrender to God's express concern for the people and follow the dictates of the Lord, the predicted horrors of I Samuel 8 may be averted. If we allow the core values of our religious faiths to govern the development of fair, equitable, and just public policy, we may just be able to avoid the tragic end that Samuel predicts for the people of Israel.

In part, that is the message of Moral Mondays; we should not enact a series of laws that endanger, disenfranchise, denigrate, or diminish the citizens of this state. Instead we need to expose our public policies to the scrutiny of God and ensure that they cohere with the core moral concerns of our Scriptural heritage.

## Mat 25:31-46 NRS

### What We Have Done to/for God

<sup>31</sup> "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory.

<sup>32</sup> All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats,

<sup>33</sup> and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

<sup>34</sup> 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;

<sup>35</sup> 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,

<sup>36</sup> 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.'

<sup>37</sup> 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?

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

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

<sup>40</sup> 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.'

<sup>41</sup> 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;

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

<sup>43</sup> 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.'

<sup>44</sup> 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?'

<sup>45</sup> 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.'

<sup>46</sup> And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

The "Judgment of the Nations" in Matthew 25:31-46 is a crucial passage to consider in any conversation about social justice. It evidences God's concern for the poor and other socially marginalized and needy people. It sets God's concern for humans in need in the context of a discussion about accessing eternal life, thereby it increases the importance of

meeting their needs. Frankly, it makes acts of social justice a theological concern and an expression of our devotion to God.

This is a potent passage that has so much rich content that it is hard to address briefly. As such, we can consider a few themes briefly from this overall account that might prove helpful for preaching and teaching from this pericope.

1) As we confront the premise of the entire passage, we should note that the narrative herein addresses our eternal fates. Instead of trying to access spiritual reasons for some to “go away into eternal punishment” and others enter “into eternal life” this religious concern is addressed in very tangible ways. Treatment of the “least of these” becomes the basis for the determination of our destinies. How we treat those we consider to be least important among us is thereby elevated in relevance; our treatment of those we deem as marginal becomes wholly consequential and crucial both to God and to us!

2) Perhaps the simplest message from this passage is the most straightforward; the way that we treat others is the way that we would treat God if God were standing right in front of us. So inasmuch as our state is developing policies and enacting laws that will hurt the poorest and otherwise most vulnerable North Carolinians, what are they saying about the way that we actually value our relationship with God by the way that we treat each other? Would we be comfortable leaving our God without those things God needed to survive? Would we allow God’s needs to go unmet? Would we allow our God to suffer the indignities of poverty,

inadequate healthcare, diminished rights, and denigrated status? If not, then why would we allow our brothers and sisters to suffer these indignities?

3) In addition, the Greek term *ethnos* that we translate as “nations” is more complex than we might perceive. It can mean “gentiles” as in the people of non-Jewish descent who are born outside of the confines of the Covenant people. In this regard the passage can be read as God’s means of evaluating those outside the traditional confines of acceptable religious identity. This, then, becomes the fundamental way for judging individual human beings’ ultimate acceptability to God. Those who care for the least, lost, and left out can access God’s eternal reign, while those who do not are denied access.

Alternatively this term can be interpreted as “nation-state” and therefore serve as a reference to governmental entities. This particular interpretation can prove fruitful inasmuch as it supports the notion that the way that we should judge any collective human group, be it a nation or government (...or even a church, synagogue, or mosque), is by the way that it treats its most vulnerable citizens. In this regard, the passage can serve as the basis for a thorough-

going critique of what is taking place in our state government now. It allows us to ask whether the policies that our General Assembly advocates are consistent with God's will and to ponder the consequences for developing policies that are antithetical to God's will and human decency.

- 4) The latter part of this parable (vv. 41-46) rarely gets the attention that the former portion (vv. 31-40) does, perhaps because of its harsh view of the damnation of those with hearts calloused to the needs of others. If we are able to suspend our general resistance to this "works righteousness" paradigm for a moment and our tendency to interpret this passage in a metaphysical manner, perhaps we will be able to wrestle with the implication of the final few verses in light of our contemporary state. For example, for those individuals or the collective groups that ignore the needs of the poor, this passage provides a context from which to argue that they are creating a tangible this-worldly hell for themselves. Considering this in the context of our state which has denied Unemployment Benefits to up to 170,000 people, which has refused to accept the funds that would offer 500,000 people Medicaid Benefits, which has taken \$100,000,000 from an already strapped public education

program to fund a voucher scheme, which has offered changes to the rules regulating voting that would disenfranchise tens of thousands of people, it may well be said that those who ignore the needy in our midst are opening up a "hell on earth." And it is a hell of their own making that leaves unemployed people with no means of support, sick people with no access to healthcare, our children undereducated, and our elderly and minority communities hindered from voting. This "hell on earth" is created by policies antithetical to God's will and God's agenda for humanity.

- 5) This passage also provides correlations to many of the concerns of the Forward Together Movement: Hunger-discussions of poverty abatement and Unemployment Benefits; Thirsty-discussions about the environmental dangers of fracking to our water supply; Stranger-discussions about immigrant rights and immigration status; Naked-discussions about the vulnerability of elderly and minority communities to voting laws that may disenfranchise them; Sick-discussion about Medicaid and efforts to close hospitals; Prison-discussions about the Racial Justice Act, the denial of the right to vote to formerly incarcerated people, and

the problems with the criminal justice system in our state in general. If there is one biblical passage that speaks to the plethora of problems produced by the NCGA's recent legislation, it is this pericope.

- 6) Finally, this passage, like Genesis 1:26-27 revisits the compelling

argument that the way we treat those in need is the best indication of the way that we would treat God's Self, if God were standing in front of us. If our treatment of those otherwise marginalized in our 21<sup>st</sup> century world serves as the chief indicator of our Love of God, then ...

## Act 2:41-47 NRS

### Liberation and Unity: The Work of the Spirit

<sup>41</sup> So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added.

<sup>42</sup> They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

<sup>43</sup> Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.

<sup>44</sup> All who believed were together and had all things in common;

<sup>45</sup> they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.

<sup>46</sup> Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts,

<sup>47</sup> praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Acts chapter 2 is the story of the Pentecost; it is the biblical story of the inaugural appearance of the Holy Spirit as an active agent available to all human beings. It is the fulfillment of the prophecy from Joel 2:

<sup>28</sup> Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.

<sup>29</sup> Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.

(Joel 2:28-29 NRS)

In the post resurrection world of the early church, this event marked the dawn of the Messianic age as all of God's people are now eligible to receive God's Spirit; the empowering Spirit that filled judges, kings, and prophets of old was now available to everyone of God's people. And because of this momentous occasion

and the availability of this source of limitless power and boundless acts of God's liberating activity, the very nature of life in this world began to change.

There is much in this passage that can prove useful for sermon development; in the interest of time, let us focus on a few key themes:

- 1) This pericope offers us a view of what social justice really looks like. In this instance, the presence of the Spirit facilitates both the exchange of goods and services between those who had and those who needed and the creation of a sense of economic balance. In essence, we are left with a new sense of community formed by the Spirit and sustained in a status of equity by the redistribution of wealth. The need for the Spirit in this work is crucial and should be emphasized as we explore this



pericope. The effect of the Spirit should also be considered, for the Spirit's presence is the catalyst for social transformation.

- 2) This passage also gives us a glimpse of the Divine ideal for human interpersonal relationships. It should not be overlooked in this picture of the Reign of God on earth that there is justice, that needs are met, that interests are common, and that commitment is shared. When this ideal is laid against the backdrop of the regressive legislation emanating from our General Assembly, the clear contrasts can be seen and our current legislation is found wanting in every way. This passage offers an alternative paradigm for interpersonal and communal engagement that can serve as a critical rejoinder to the policies of our state government. It represents God's alternative vision of the way that human beings can relate to each other as a community and provides us a model for the kinds of policies necessary for a just and sustainable society.
- 3) This pericope fosters this unified community from the complex arrangement of human difference discussed in 2:9-11 where we see an assembly of:

<sup>9</sup> Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,

<sup>10</sup> Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes,

<sup>11</sup> Cretans and Arabs (Act 2:9-11 NRS)

This disparate group of Diasporan peoples gathered from across the known world has been united by the power of the Spirit and committed to a common vision. The notion of union across difference resonates well with the composition of Moral Mondays participants, where countless people from manifold different backgrounds representing a host of distinct issues and interests have joined together as one in the fusion politics of the day. In many respects, Moral Monday seems to be an expression of the activity of the Spirit who can unite people from across North Carolina to speak as one choir with one voice.

- 4) The notion of "all things in common" in the Moral Monday Movement can well be an expression of the way that people have adopted different issues gleaned from others as their own and taken up signs, placards, banners, songs, and shouts to express concerns originally not

their own. Having things in common means that concerns that were not mine can become mine because if my sister or my brother deems them important, then they are also important to me. In his way, the notion of having all things in common can serve as a means of demonstrating the ideal of Love; for Love is really treating the other person, their issues, their concerns, as though they were as important to me as am I and are my own issues and concerns.

For many of the participants, Moral Mondays really are a glimpse of the Kingdom of God. I say this in part because of an experience I had with a deacon from my home church. One Sunday as I was walking through the sanctuary after worship, I was approached by Deacon J. who asked for an update about the Moral Monday Movement. After I shared with him my reflections on the most recent Monday's events and what was planned for the next few, he told me how amazed he was at the crowds. I told him that I, too, was grateful to see so many people coming out to participate. That's when he said something that made me think long and hard about the power of Moral Mondays. He told me that he was involved in the Civil Rights Movement back in the 1960's and that he could never remember a moment when the crowds were as diverse as they were today. This, he suggested, is the real

work of the Spirit in our midst, bringing together blacks *and whites*, older folk *and younger folk*, well to do folk *and folk who have nothing*, liberals *and conservatives!* They have all come together and have committed themselves to a common vision, a common mission, and a common goal. Yes, this really is the work of the Spirit in our midst in this age; and if we choose to reflect on this text, the Spirit's fingerprints will surely be obvious to all who look on this eclectic coalition of otherwise unlikely allies. So for many, the Moral Monday Movement really is an expression of the Spirit's power at work in our midst, overcoming divisions of color, class, and creed and uniting us as only God could do. Yes, perhaps in these dark times in our state, we can rejoice inasmuch as the Spirit is still evident and at work giving us all in response to the demonic powers of repression and regression and spiritual wickedness in high places, a hopeful glimpse of the Kingdom of God.