

WHY MUST THE POOR SUFFER THE MOST?

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Friday, 28 August 2009

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"For the needy shall not always be forgotten, nor the hope of the poor perish forever."

Psalm 9:18 (NRSV)

"Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy."

Proverbs 31:8-9 (NRSV)

The new Minnesota budget cuts proposed by Governor Pawlenty reveal an old truth—the poor suffer disproportionately when money is scarce. We all know the game and how it works, but I'm afraid many Minnesotans have never seriously considered why this is so. Thus, it might be productive for us to investigate some of the values and (mis)perceptions lying behind this unfortunate situation.

Poverty doesn't just happen; it's usually the result of policies and laws deliberately intended to benefit those having political and economic power. But this isn't new—it's been going on as long as there were kings or other authority figures with enough influence to implement their will against that of the masses. The writer of the Psalms perhaps said it best: "Shall the throne of iniquity, which devises evil by law, have fellowship with You" (Psalm 94:20). He was saying that venial rulers and their cohorts who devised evil laws or decrees against the poor could have no legitimate fellowship with God. Whatever Divine fellowship or approval they claimed was delusionary, since they were in direct violation of His will.

Among many other reasons, the poor suffer disproportionately as budgets are developed because:

- There is a definite public bias against them relating to the many stereotypes and anecdotal examples characterizing them as dysfunctional, lazy, untrained, and lacking in character.

- They are perceived as being the cause of most problems in society, and so deserve to be shorted, especially when times are tough. They are the problem, not part of the answer. If they disappeared, most problems of society would go away.
- They are easy to victimize because they lack organized, credible voices to speak for them.
- They tend to be invisible to society. As Michael Harrington pointed out in his seminal book entitled *The Other America* (1962), the poor tend to live in places bypassed by the beautiful people; in ghettos, hardscrabble farms, isolated shacks, and other places seen as dirty and undesirable for decent people.
- They are perceived as "resource sink holes," soaking up resources while giving nothing back. Their problems are thought to so intractable as to be beyond the help of normal public appropriations.
- But far and away the biggest cause of apathy--and even antipathy--toward the unfortunate of society is that we now have a public value system that states in hundreds of ways the basic concept that the poor are poor because they deserve it. We greedily claim "I've got mine, and I'm not going to share with you because you don't deserve it, and besides, it wouldn't help anyway." The biblical concepts of compassion, empathy, and even love have become lost in the struggle for wealth and power, to our society's great loss.

When these biases and misconceptions get translated into law, then you have what the Psalmist lamented against--thrones of iniquity that devise evil by law, all the while claiming a Divine mandate for their cause. It's not that legislators and governors as they deny justice to the poor are intending to do wrong; they are just victims, as are all of us, of false and extremely damaging perceptions as to the causes and effects of poverty. They need education and enlightenment, as we all do.

So what does God say that we should do about the budget situation as it impacts the poor today? First, we need to understand that God has a soft heart for the poor, especially for those who are victims, not of their own dysfunctional behavior, but of world systems designed to work against them. Second, we need to share some of our wealth with those who do not have enough through charities, food shelves, and so forth. Third, we need to advocate or speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves. We can begin this process by gently refuting persons we contact who hold some or all of the above stereotyped values. And fourth, we can support those politicians and political parties who show some compassion for the poor. These actions won't solve the problem, but they will help. They will also place you within the cover of God's word.