

Minnesota Without Poverty  
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Our country...our state...has become increasingly diverse...and diversity in our faith backgrounds is no exception. But it strikes me I hear many of the same themes coming from our different statements of faith...themes that echo what I as a Christian hear from Jesus. It is in Luke where Jesus stands in the synagogue...and is handed the scroll ...and reads these words: "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, he has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." These are actually the words of the Israelite prophet Isaiah.

Well the text tells us the people were so impressed with his reading. He was a local boy who had made good. They were amazed at his speaking....until...until he told them "today, these words have been fulfilled in your hearing." Suddenly it becomes dicey you see...Jesus is telling the people that the waiting is over...its time for the preaching to end...and the action to begin. Today the dreaming ends and the work begins. Today the poor receive good news, and the oppressed are freed, the blind begin to see again, a new year, the Lord's year, has begun.

And that stirred up the people. You see its one thing to let someone say nice words, even preaching platitudes from the pulpit. For dreamers are no threat to anyone. But when people act on those dreams, folks become anxious...because it might well change things...people might be impacted. So we talk and preach about recovery of sight to the blind...nothing wrong with that. But try and change a system of health care so that the blind are cared for and ...well you know what has happened with that. And the same when we speak of the poor...preach it sister...but just leave it at that.

It was hardly a month ago that we celebrated the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr. He had a dream. Does anyone here doubt that if he would kept his dream confined to his pulpit, that he would still be alive today. But it was when he acted on those dreams...on behalf of the poor and the oppressed...that the smiles in many quarters disappeared. So with Jesus in those verses I read...by the end of the chapter, the people had led him out of the synagogue to the top of a cliff, planning to throw him off.

A writer named Ed Loring...I don't know him; I just read this quote...says "Our nation's greatest evil is that as a people we fear and despise the poor. I was raised in a faith that teaches us that the poor are ambassadors of God, in fact they represent God in our midst. But today a poor person, unknown and hungry, represents evil instead and stands as the enemy." The Christian Bible is not an economics textbook, but it speaks about causes for poverty and over and over again it tells us the poor are there because of oppression...because of a lack of fairness and justice.

It struck me again this week as I read an editorial in the Star and Tribune. It took me a while to wade through what the author was driving at...until in his final paragraph it became quite clear...in speaking of the challenges that face Minnesota, the deficit, the recovery plans...his main interest was to increase individual wealth. Only somehow I got the idea the concern only addressed a certain segment of society. Where in such thinking does the common good come into the conversation?

In 2004, Minnesota religious leaders from a wide spectrum of faith traditions drafted and signed "A Common foundation: Shared Principals for Overcoming Poverty." Think of that...leaders from almost every faith tradition in the state. You think getting Republicans and Democrats together is a challenge. And yet to find agreement on the Common Foundation was not a challenge at all. It's principals are no brainers to people of faith: "We believe it is the Creator's intent that all people are provided those things that protect human dignity and make for healthy life: adequate food and shelter, meaningful work, safe communities, health care, and education."

And two years later, a bipartisan legislative commission was formed at the state capitol, formed around much of the common foundation...with the expressed purpose of ending poverty in Minnesota by 2020. In January of 2009, they issued a set of recommendations to guide public policy decisions for the next decade.

In a few weeks, the 6 ELCA Lutheran Bishops in Minnesota will send a letter to our 800,000 members around the state calling for a day in April, a day of prayer, conversation, and action. In a very complex debate revolving around a \$1.2 billion deficit, we believe the faith community has a role to play. We believe our faith makes clear that care for the poor undergirds care for the common good. We believe people of faith can shape debate and hold accountable to such principals the proposed solutions.

Lots of talking...lots of writing...lots of proposals...just like countless ones that have gone before. But today we dare to believe it can be different. Today the dreaming ends and the work begins. Today the poor receive good news, and the oppressed are freed, the blind begin to see again, a new year, the Lord's year, begins. Today is begins...and we are all part of it.