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“The Single Most Important Text in the Entire Christian Bible”

A sermon by J. Clinton McCann, Jr.

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Psalm 82; John 1:1–5, 14

Let’s begin with the question that I hope the sermon title has raised in your mind, and let me invite you to contemplate the question: In your opinion, what is the single most important text in the entire Christian Bible?

– “God is love,” I heard someone say, which is 1 John 4:16, certainly a worthy candidate for being the Bible’s most important text.

– John 3:17 perhaps, “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him;” and we might add the more famous John 3:16 as well, “For God so loved the world. . .”

– The Great Commandment is another good possibility – Matthew 22:34-40, where Jesus cites Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 to commend loving God and loving neighbor above all else.

– And we might add John 1:14, the verse we heard a moment ago: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, . . . full of grace and truth.”

Well, we could certainly add several more good candidates, but this is enough. Now, let me ask you another question: Did it occur to any of you to mention Psalm 82? No! I'm not surprised; but what I want you to know is that one very prominent biblical scholar thinks that Psalm 82 is "the single most important text in the entire Christian Bible." He continues, "It is, for me, more important than John 1:14 which speaks of the Word of God becoming flesh and living among us."¹

The scholar I'm quoting is John Dominic Crossan, who, rather surprisingly, is a New Testament scholar, known especially for his research and writing about the historical Jesus. Now, as an Old Testament scholar myself, and more specifically a Psalms scholar, I am just thrilled that a New Testament scholar has concluded that the most important text in the Bible is in the Old Testament, and even better, in the Book of Psalms!

Of course, I realize that you are probably not as excited about this as I am; but in any case, let me share with you, in his own words, why Crossan thinks that Psalm 82 is "the single most important text in the entire Christian Bible":

Before celebrating . . . [the] incarnation [John 1:14, "the Word became flesh"], we must address a prior question about the character of the divinity involved. And . . . [Psalm 82] best summarizes for me the character of . . . [the biblical] God. . . . It imagines a . . . scene in which God sits among the gods and goddesses in divine council. Those pagan gods and goddesses are dethroned not just because they are pagan, nor because they are other, nor because they are competition. They are dethroned for injustice, for divine malpractice, for transcendental malfeasance in office. They are rejected because they do not demand and effect justice among the peoples of the earth. And that justice is spelled out as protecting the poor from the rich, protecting the systemically weak from the systemically powerful. Such injustice creates darkness over the earth and shakes the very foundation of the world.²

Crossan's final sentence, which you just heard, is his description of Psalm 82, verse 5:

They [that is, the gods and goddesses] have neither knowledge nor understanding;
they walk around in darkness;
all the foundations of the earth are shaken.

It's a key verse, and we'll come back to it in just a moment. But first, we have to acknowledge the potential danger of Psalm 82. You see, it would be very easy to hear Psalm 82 imperialistically and triumphalistically – that is, our God is better than your god(s), and so our God puts your god(s) out of business. But that's not the point! And the potential danger is ameliorated significantly by the literary context of Psalm 82 within the Book of Psalms. You see, only seven psalms later, Psalm 89, we learn that God has dethroned the Judean king, known as God's "anointed one" or "messiah," and even as God's own "son" (see Psalm 2:7). God is willing to dethrone God's own "son" when the son has failed to do justice. In short, God plays favorites with no one or no thing, except God always favors justice!

Now, back to v. 5 – "all the foundations of the earth are shaken." In the ancient near eastern understanding of cosmology, the foundations of the earth are the mountains that hold up the sky, preventing the waters above from engulfing the earth, and that anchor the dry land in place, preventing the waters below from flooding the world. Given this cosmological understanding, the worst thing that can happen is for the mountains to shake. It's a worst-case scenario, amounting to the undoing of creation. In other words, as I like to paraphrase verse 5, the persistent failure to establish justice means that the world reverts to chaos.

Now, I ask you – could there be a biblical insight that is more timely for these past ten years? Ever since September 11, 2001, the tenth anniversary of which is next Sunday, we have sensed that chaos reigns, and that it is threatening to engulf us, and we have been terrified. What we haven't done very often, at least

not here in the United States, is to consider that the current chaos might result largely from persistent injustice in the world. Instead, our response to the threat – and it is not an unusual response in the animal kingdom or in human history – has been to fight. We invaded Iraq; we invaded Afghanistan; and we’re still fighting in both places. And even as we do, there has been discussion at the highest levels of our government as to whether we might eventually be able to stretch our military resources to invade Iran and North Korea.

Now, I am enough of a Christian realist – some might say enough of a Calvinist – not to be a total pacifist. I’m not even against maintaining a strong military. But I’m also enough of a Christian to feel compelled to wonder about the wisdom and faithfulness of fighting lots of wars in order to achieve peace. And I’m enough of a Psalms scholar to want to take seriously Psalm 82's claim that God’s way of averting chaos in the world is to attend to the weak, the needy, and the destitute!

Of course, as a Christian realist, I realize that nobody listens much to Psalms scholars! So, don’t take it from me. Instead, listen to a recognized expert. His name is Jeffrey Sachs; he teaches at Columbia University, is a world-renowned economist, and has been a major advocate of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, which aim to cut in half life-threatening poverty by the year 2015 and to wipe it out entirely by the year 2025. Sachs is the author of a book entitled The End of Poverty, which was featured on the cover of Time magazine in 2005. Here’s what he has to say in Time about responding to the current global chaos by fighting:

Since September 11, 2001 the U. S. has launched a war on terrorism, but it has neglected the deeper causes of global instability [recall Psalm 82:5 – the foundations shaking!]. The nearly \$500 billion that the U. S. will spend this year on the military will never buy lasting peace if the U. S. continues to spend only one-thirtieth of that, around \$16 billion, to address the plight of the poorest of the poor, whose societies are destabilized [think Psalm 82:5 again!] by extreme poverty. The \$16 billion represents 0.15% of

U. S. income, just 15 cents on every \$100 of our national income. The share devoted to helping the poor has declined for decades, and is a tiny fraction of what the U. S. has repeatedly promised, and failed to give. . . . The richest and most powerful country, long the leader and inspiration in democratic ideals, is barely participating in global efforts to end poverty and protect the environment, thus undermining its own security.³

If there's a word for this situation – other than “stupidity” perhaps – it's the word “irony.” One of the saints of Eden Seminary, where I teach, and one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century, was Reinhold Niebuhr. He wrote a book in the early 1950s called The Irony of American History, in which he argued that what our nation was doing to make ourselves safer and more secure, we thought, was actually undermining our safety and security. That's true irony, and it's still with us!

So, what can we do? Sachs concludes his Time essay (and his book) with nine very concrete steps that he says the U. S. and the world need to take to end life-threatening poverty in the world, and thus to achieve lasting stability and peace.⁴ You'll be relieved to hear that I'm not going to list all nine – rather, just two that seem to be most directly do-able by ordinary people like us:

1) “Raise the Voice of the Poor”: Actually, Sachs's major emphasis here is to issue a challenge to democracies in the developing world to call the world's attention to their own neediness. And there is some evidence that this is already happening – for instance, at least six Latin American countries in recent years have elected “leftist” presidents, meaning by “leftist” an inclination to pay some attention to the plight of the poor! But Sachs also mentions Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. as individuals who raised the voice of the poor; and maybe we can too. If we can, it will probably mean something like getting to know the rest of the world. Look into the faces of the poor, and see their humanity, their struggles, their smiles, their aspirations, their hopes. To be sure, the poor need help; but they can also help us! El Salvadoran theologian, Jon Sobrino, speaks about the “evangelizing potential” of the poor; that is, to us affluent, individualistic, self-

oriented North Americans, the poor can offer valuable lessons about the very things we lack – community, cooperation, simplicity.⁵ So, raise the voice of the poor; or since I know you all have a history of doing that here, I should say, “Continue to raise the voice of the poor”! And listen to their voices as well.

2) “Make a Personal Commitment”: To be sure, neither Jeffrey Sachs nor I can tell you exactly what it will mean for you to make a personal commitment to ending life-threatening poverty in the world. But I invite you to contemplate that invitation; and as you do, let me share with you the advice offered to people like us Presbyterians, who are not generally poor economically, by two Brazilian theologians, Leonardo and Clovis Boff. They suggest what they call “evangelical poverty,” which they describe this way:

Faced with a predatory, consumerist society, the evangelically poor will use the goods of this world with moderation and sharing. . . . The evangelically poor are those who make themselves available to God in the realization of God’s project in this world, and thereby make themselves into instruments and signs of the . . . [realm] of God . . . [the] fruits [of which] are, principally, gratitude to . . . [God], acceptance of divine adoption, life and justice for all, and universal [human community]. . . . The evangelically poor will establish solidarity with the economically poor and even identify with them, must as the historical Jesus did.⁶

Just a friendly reminder though, friends, in closing. If we do attempt to make a personal commitment, establishing solidarity with the poor and even identifying with them, as Jesus did, we’ll find ourselves profoundly out of step with much of the current political rhetoric in our country. Leonard Pitts, Jr., one of my favorite syndicated columnists, reminds of this in his essay in last Sunday’s newspaper that was scheduled to coincide with the dedication of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial on the National Mall in Washington, DC:

. . . when he died, Martin Luther King was fighting for the right of workers to form a union and for the dignity of the poor.

That is not a bedtime story from way back when. It is a headline from right now. Unions, after all, are controversial again. Worse, poor people find themselves denigrated and demeaned in ways that shock the conscience.

Former South Carolina Lt. Gov. Andre Bauer once likened them to stray animals one feeds at the back door. Fox “News” pundit John Stossel sees them as the enemy in a battle between “the makers and the takers.” Nebraska Attorney General Jon Bruning compares them to scavenging “raccoons.” Ann Coulter says welfare creates “irresponsible animals.” There are people in this country – working people – who must routinely choose between rent and groceries, prescription drugs and electric lights. But we are encouraged by some on the political right to regard them with contempt and save our empathy for the fabulously wealthy.

You’ll have to go some to find a starker example of how morally blinkered this country has become.⁷

Recall that the Boffs grounded their plea for “evangelical poverty” – solidarity with and even identification with the economically poor – in the life of the historical Jesus; and that takes us back to John Dominic Crossan, who reminds us that the God whom we Christians profess became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, is, as Psalm 82 suggests, the God who wills the establishment of justice on earth, measured by the well-being of the poor, the weak, and the needy, simply because all the nations belong to God!

So, friends, for the sake of the poor themselves, make a personal commitment; for your own sake, and for the sake of the future stability, security, and peace of our country and the world, make a personal commitment; and quite literally, for God’s sake, make a personal commitment to join God at God’s work in the world. And to God be the glory! Amen.

Notes

1. Crossan, The Birth of Christianity, p. 575.
2. Crossan, The Birth of Christianity, p. 575.
3. Jeffrey D. Sachs, “How to End Poverty,” Time 165/11 (March 14, 2005): 46, 54. See also his The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time (N. Y.: The Penguin Press, 2005); the Foreword to this book is by Bono (pp. xv-xviii).
4. Sachs, “How to End Poverty,” pp. 54ff.; Sachs, The End of Poverty, pp. 365-368.
5. Jon Sobrino, The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), p. 55.
6. Leonardo and Clovis Boff, Introducing Liberation Theology, trans. by Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987), pp. 48-49.
7. Leonard Pitts, Jr., “A Monument for Humanity,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, August 28, 2011, p. A10.

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