



THE ANTI-POVERTY SOLDIER

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Community Action

Rescuing the poor from ideological gridlock and moral indifference: Reflecting on the thoughts of Jim Wallis

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The failure of political leaders to help uplift the poor will be judged a moral failure.

— Jim Wallis

Most Americans believe that if you work hard and full-time, you should not be poor. But the truth is that many working families are, and many low-income breadwinners must hold down multiple jobs just to survive.

— Jim Wallis

...the oft-repeated allusion to “our moral responsibility” toward the vulnerable of humankind is not so much evidence of an emerging global moral conscience (although it is also that) as it is of a lack of political will and action.

— Richard Beardsworth

A couple of relatively common themes during the life of this column, particularly of late, have been; 1) The apparent lack of progress in reducing racial disparities in the Twin Cities and Greater Minnesota; and 2) The notion that we as individuals and as a larger society have a moral obligation to participate in the alleviation of poverty.

In thinking through these specific topics I reconnected with a best seller published more than a decade ago by author, activist, and theologian Jim Wallis. Wallis’ book titled, *God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It* sought to turn the contemporary debate over faith and politics upside down. Before I continue, I want to make clear that I am not attempting to focus here on either religion or political ideology, but rather trying to move beyond them.

What I am most drawn to and would like to discuss is Chapter 14 of Wallis’ book titled, “Poor People are Trapped – in the Debate about Poverty.” It is this assertion, that poor people and their plight are frequently used as a political football that resonates with me the most.

Early in this chapter, Wallis, in considering the political games played at the expense of those in poverty, asks the following two questions, “Do most serious, and often complicated, social issues have just two sides? Isn’t it more likely that a variety of perspectives and approaches might be necessary to first understand and then solve a problem?” He then suggests a pair of antidotes designed to cut through any partisan reproach and posturing.

The first of these is to “insist that the debate over poverty be disciplined by results.” He calls on us not to emphasize on what is “left or right” in this debate, but instead what is “right or wrong.” Or, in other words, “what’s right and what works” when it comes to lifting people out of poverty. I believe that this kind of “solution-based approach” as he calls it, is imperative in this struggle.

Yet, in spite of all the initiatives that have been undertaken locally in the past few years, the state of Minnesota has been ranked as the “second worst state” for African Americas to live three years in a row. There has to come a time where one must be able to point to positive results. Perhaps such results are forthcoming. Still, as Wallis notes, we must set aside our political differences and the politics of blame and “focus together on finding solutions that might really work.”

The second antidote is the recognition that poverty is a “spiritual and religious issue.” Again, I don’t seek to make this a faith-based discussion so for those who don’t subscribe to this way of thinking, perhaps we can switch those terms with the words moral and ethical. While morals and ethics are both deeply rooted in religious thought,

they also transcend it and are part and parcel of many other points of view.

In a 2004 address, Wallis spoke on how frequently many politicians used the Bible to support a political or moral argument. As he referenced some of the issues for which this is done, he added that “There are thousands of verses on poverty. I don’t hear a lot of that conversation.” Certainly, there are those that don’t consider it their moral obligation to participate, in one way or another, in the war against poverty.

But for many of us, whether coming from a faith-based perspective, a philosophy of humanism, or the simple care and compassion for your fellow citizens, this much is true – poverty is indeed a moral issue. As Albert Einstein famously said, “The world is a dangerous place, not because of those who do evil, but because of those who look on and do nothing.”

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