



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



On the Night After Charleston

Efrain Agosto, *New York Theological Seminary*

Blog Series: Race Matters in the Classroom

June 23, 2015

Tags: difficult conversations | teaching biblical interpretation | biblical pedagogy

We gathered for our regular summer session class on a Thursday evening at New York Theological Seminary, June 18, the night after the horrific shootings in an AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Three of my six students for the class were out sick; no doubt saddened by the tragedy of the night before, perhaps even so adversely affected that they had a kind of visceral, physical reaction that affected their health. Six of the nine African Americans murdered Wednesday night in Charleston were women, by all accounts gifted and faithful leaders of church and community. My summer class, as diverse as any at New York Theological Seminary, includes three African American women (all three absent on Thursday night), two Latino men and a Korean woman. These are persons who love their churches and work tirelessly for them, just like the folks in Charleston. Indeed, many NYTS students are in Seminary to prepare even better for their ongoing work for their beloved churches. This makes for a rich, pedagogical experience, including in biblical studies classes, where the text comes alive given the diverse background of our students in each and every class.

Addressing the Text in Light of Charleston

The three students that did attend class Thursday evening prayed with me for all those affected by what happened in Charleston the night before, which means all of us; the whole country has been deeply stricken by such horror and hate.

Then we began discussion of the texts of study for that evening, several final passages in the New Testament Letter of James. Our course is entitled, "Studies in James and 1 Peter: The Ethics of Earliest Christianity." We have completed our second week of classes (out of three) and it took till Thursday to finish James! I had taken my time the first week of classes (we had gathered on Tuesday and Thursday evenings, and Saturday morning) to address the historical, literary and theological issues in the first two chapters of James. The previous class, on Tuesday, June 16, the students had made presentations of their own on the main message, basic structure and theological/ethical implications of various passages in James 3 and most of 4, and now it was time to finish our study.

One passage of study that Thursday night included the paragraph in which the author denounces rich merchants for their focus on making money: "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money'" (James 4:13 NRSV). The author goes on to challenge such unbridled economic focus for the lack of attention to God and God's will on the matter. Shouldn't they say, James insists, "If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that" (v.15)? Otherwise, their efforts at merely "making money" constitutes boasting and arrogance, indeed "evil" (v.16). And then, this early Christian pastor writing to his flock dispersed around the Roman Empire (James 1:1) posits this proverbial adage, applied to the economic arrogance of too many people in that Empire: "Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin" (v.17).

In the aftermath of the Charleston massacre, I was struck as I prepared for class that day, looking at this passage in James 4:13-17 closely, that from Newtown to Charleston, America has failed. My class joined me that evening in some intense moments of reflection. They agreed: We have failed to heed the call of those slaughtered children and teachers in Newtown, Connecticut's Sandy Hook Elementary School in December 2012 to pass national legislation that would help control who can buy a gun anywhere in this country. Similarly, this child of racism in Charlestown, South Carolina, just 21 years old (the troubled shooter in Newton was 19), should never have had access to a gun, and no so-called constitutional right for anyone to bear arms should stop our legislators in Washington from doing so much more than they have done. At the very least, a national registry for gun ownership, with complete mental health checks, is needed now! Otherwise, we who know "the right thing to do" are failing to do it and commit heinous sin, just like the young men of Newtown and Charleston. My students and I are sure that the economics of the matter, along with this nation's original sin of racism, hold people back, just like the ancient passage from the Letter of James invokes economic arrogance and exploitation. After all, the U.S. gun lobby, represented by the all too powerful National Rifle Association, is not really about defending "second amendment rights." They are about "big business" because the manufacturing, sale and ownership of all kinds of guns, including military style assault weapons, is big business in this country, and the "business of America is business," big business. Not taking into account the pain and anguish of Newtown and Charleston, and passing stricter gun control laws on a national level, is emblematic of our love of "doing business and making money" at all costs. Such was the dialogue that a historical study of an ancient New Testament text about the economic violence

of the Roman imperial era engendered on the night after a night of violence in Charleston, USA.

Some Good News

In the midst of such pain, there was some good news last week, which also impacted our conversation on the James text last Thursday night. Pope Francis issued an encyclical on the environment, calling on the world's governments to pay closer attention to the need for climate legislation and economic considerations to ensure the well being of the earth and the earth's people, especially the poor. I have not read the document in its entirety but these opening lines are telling: "We have come to see ourselves as her [the earth's] lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she 'groans in travail' (Rom 8:22)." Given such "violence" and "sin," the Pope challenges global governments and economies, especially the richest countries and corporations, to consider the damage they do, especially to the poor, with unchecked economic growth at the cost of the earth's health.

Last Thursday evening, our class also studied perhaps the most well known passage in James, in which the author rails against "rich people," who need to repent of their ways, whose focus on accumulating riches belies the fact that such treasures will one day rot, rust and burn (James 5:1-3). Exploitation of the labor force on behalf of rich landowners, who "have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure" and who "have fattened [their] hearts in a day of slaughter" demands justice from God, writes our New Testament author (5:4-5). The murder of the earth and its peoples cannot continue (v.6). This connection between unbridled love of money and the exploitation of the earth and the poor is precisely where the Pope's encyclical stakes a claim for action on behalf of environmental policies that do justice and plan for a secure world for all. The class agreed: Just as James called us to do the thing we know to be right about some issues as racism and violence, the text also teaches us to consider the poor and the needy, including both humanity and nature. Such were the directions of our dialogue that evening, emboldened by several "texts" that converged that week: the Charleston massacre, the Pope's encyclical on the environment, and our reading of the Letter of James.

A Biblical Pedagogy in Light of News – Good and Bad

Upon reflection about this class experience on the evening after Charleston, I was thankful that mere exegetical study of a few ancient passages of scripture led to such rich, thoughtful and impassioned engagement in a seminary classroom. The news of the week, both hopeful and horrific (not even mentioning the other startling report: the ironic and sad twist of a white woman pretending to be black in order to get ahead in her quest to do justice; we needed her skill and effort, but as the white woman that she is, not with her lies), drove us at NYTS this busy summer week to read the Bible with our newspapers, as Karl Barth famously taught us to do. Moreover, the following pedagogical lessons were also reaffirmed:

1. Historical critical exegesis of the biblical text is more often than not informed by the lives of the readers, even in the act of reading the text together. As a teacher, I am alert to those realities, especially when students (and me) are hurting from bad news from around the world, or simply from our own life's journey. Sometimes the text of the day even helps! Most times, we have to put it aside and deal with the hurt, relevant or not to the topic of the day. Indeed, sometimes the texts being analyzed are aided by the news of the day, if we are willing to listen and read closely.
2. As a teacher of biblical text, the Christian scriptures in particular, I am never worried about "eisegesis." Often, so-called "objective" historical methods get it wrong; it's always a penultimate task. Many times, the modern reader, reading through the lens of current day experience, will garner fresh, new and accurate insight to the ancient text, simply because there are universal realities in the human experience that transcend the centuries.
3. Race, ethnicity and socioeconomic matters in the classroom matter, both because it always has, including in our ancient texts, and because it matters to our students, their lives, their education, and their future endeavors. Something like the South Carolina killings is so shocking that we are reminded what a long way we have to go in this country to deal with the demons that plague us as a nation, and if the ancient biblical texts that so many of us hold dear cannot speak to all that plagues us, as well as all that gives us hope, even as we try to understand them as the texts of ancient peoples, our teaching and learning invariably falls short.

Questions for Further Discussion:

1. How do you "teach" on the day after a major news event that impacts you and your students, especially one as shocking and horrific as the shootings in Charleston?
2. As we know, the biblical texts can help or hurt in our quest for justice in our modern day world. How do we teach them, alert to this reality, especially when many of our students come ready to glorify them at all costs?
3. Is there a role for the biblical scholar in these public debates that so divide our country, such as racism, gun control and climate change? How can we be both teachers of ancient texts and advocates for change, both tasks in dialogue with each other?

We invite your comments and responses.

We also invite blog entries for Race Matters in the Classroom. Blog ideas and entries may be sent to: Paul Myhre (myhrep@wabash.edu) at the Wabash Center to be considered for posting in this blog space.

<https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2015/06/on-the-night-after-charleston/>