

Reading the bible with the poor approach to bible study presentation  
2/25/11

Way of doing biblical study, a methodology of biblical interpretation, that connects contemporary stories of poor people organizing with biblical stories

Developed in a number of places:

- interpretative techniques developed by poor people in their own communities and organizations including the development of the Poverty Scholars Program
- "Reading the Bible with the Poor" semester class and used in subsequent classes including the "Gospel of Matthew" and the "Gospel of Paul: Poverty and Spirituality"
- (and other experiences where New Testament scholars and poor people have come together to reinterpret biblical texts and the overall biblical story)

Commonality:

- putting organized poor people and the stories of their organizing struggles into the center of biblical interpretation, drawing parallels and insights from their juxtaposition
- discovering the biblical voice from the margins as "good news" and exploring participatory approaches of re-reading the Bible for empowerment in contexts of poverty.
- methodology includes historical reinterpretation using primary sources about the Roman Empire and other empires including texts and images from the ancient world,
- eye towards historical issues that parallel contemporary issues (including taxation, debt, infrastructure and development, charity and patronage, poverty, wealth and political power)
- includes engaging texts that have been used historically and contemporarily to justify poverty and oppression and "overlooked" anti-poverty texts, like the collection, whose real meaning only becomes clear in conversation with similar examples of solidarity among the organized poor today
- means and tools of Bible study include play-acting, group reading, artistic expressions, contemporary texts and media, documentaries
  - o DWU press release with parable of the persistent widow
  - o Documentary featuring tent city with collection
  - o Last years of King and last week of Jesus in Unsettling Force book

Example: Reading the Bible with the Poor course at Union:

- Each course Bible study session was structured into two parts. For the first part, we gathered together to eat a light meal and hear from representatives from local poor people's organizations from for the first hour. In the second hour, we engaged in a Bible study with the students, community organization representatives and others present around the context and themes presented in the first hour.

Examples from the course:

- We introduced Larry Gibson who told the story of fighting the Massey Coal Company to keep his family's land in Sharon, West Virginia. Larry told the group about the 109 acts of violence perpetrated against his land, property, dog and self as a result of refusing to give up his land for more mountaintop removal. We then worked to connect the story of Naboth's vineyard from 1 Kings 21 and of Larry. Our discussion pertained to violence, civil disobedience, land inheritance, power structures, coal mining, and ecology. We drew connections between Naboth who refused to give up his land to King Ahab and Queen Jezebel and Larry who has refused to give his land up to the mining companies. We also linked Larry and the prophet Elijah.
- ROC-NY visit with focus on Luke 19, the parable of the Unjust Judge and the Persistent Widow and their use of this parable in weekly prayer vigils for workers rights that resulted in a successful trial.