

Reminding Your Leaders to Protect the Vulnerable

How can pastors and other religious leaders address the U.S. national deficit and fiscal policy without resorting to partisan labeling?

We could begin with Scriptures, where many Christians look for guidance, and remind our congregants and the wider public that the biblical standard for ethical governance is based on how government treats the most vulnerable people in society.

Consider these passages:

— “It is well with those who deal generously and lend, who conduct their affairs with justice... They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor; their righteousness endures forever; their horn is exalted in honor” (Psalm 112:5, 9).

— “A ruler who oppresses the poor is a beating rain that leaves no food” (Proverbs 28:3).

What these texts suggest is that morally responsible leaders feed hungry children, care for homeless families, and protect and provide care to vulnerable seniors.

Public officials whose deficit reduction plans would threaten social safety nets for the hungry, homeless and otherwise vulnerable members of society may call themselves whatever political label they choose.

Pastors and other religious leaders should call them morally irresponsible.

Jesus described such people as being “accursed.” That’s a strong condemnation. Pastors and other religious leaders should remind our congregants and the wider public that it is based on a moral vision.

If people who lead congregations have somehow lost or otherwise lack the capacity to address the ongoing fiscal debate in these terms, we should not be surprised when public officials who belong to those congregations speak and act in callous ways concerning policies that benefit vulnerable people.

Public officials whose religious leaders fail to teach about the moral imperative to care for and protect vulnerable people are less likely to be concerned about moral condemnation when they support and enact policies that oppress vulnerable people.

I suggest that pastors and other congregational leaders arrange to meet with public officials for pastoral conversations about generosity, compassion and justice.

When we do so, it might be wise to speak of our concern for the officials as well as the people whose lives will be affected by official conduct.

The officials must be shown that we care for them also, and that our concern goes beyond the next election or polling cycle. We care about their condition as moral beings exercising power in a moral universe.

In seeking to provide this moral compass, religious leaders must also challenge public officials who use metaphors such as “fiscal cliff” to describe the difficulties now facing the United States.

A cliff is a natural boundary. The present fiscal crisis facing public officials isn’t the result of forces in nature.

It is a ditch, not a cliff, resulting from deliberate political maneuvering that may result in a retreat from protections and provisions for vulnerable people.

Morally sensitive people (including but by no means limited to pastors and other religious leaders) have the moral authority to declare to rulers that it is morally wrong and unethical to dig a ditch into which vulnerable people will fall and suffer.

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Shame on us if we fail or refuse to exercise that authority!

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