

Misjudged Movements

Isaiah 58:1-12; James 5:1-6

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I taught in the Memphis Public Schools in the 1990s. I was also the Middle School Basketball Coach. During my three years as a teacher and coach, I had a very good basketball team in my second year. One thing I learned as a young coach was the 1-2-1-1 full court press. I had good athletes, and we ran that press very well. As that season progressed, we lost a game or two outside our division, but we were undefeated in our division.

Then we played one of our rivals for Homecoming. This team was also undefeated. In those days, we had early dismissal for big games in the school gymnasium. We had a packed gym and great excitement. It was a thrilling game! But we lost by a layup at the end of the game. I can still see that last shot.

After the game, my dad came up to me and said matter-of-factly, “You pressed too much.” And you know what? He was right. The other team was quicker, and we allowed too many easy shots when they broke our press. I misjudged movements in that game. I misjudged the speed of our opponents. I misjudged matchups. I misjudged strengths and weaknesses. I couldn’t see clearly what was going on because I was locked into one way of thinking. I believe something similar is true when we think about race and poverty in the United States.

Many people have believed that we as a nation finally made things right on racism and poverty in the 1960s. Many people have adopted a narrative that blames poor black people for their disproportionate social ills. That narrative has misjudged movements. That narrative has misjudged the movement of jobs out of our cities after World War II. That narrative has misjudged the movement of the white and black middle class out of our cities from the 1960s until now. That narrative has misjudged how the loss of socioeconomic diversity created unprecedented pockets of urban poverty. That narrative has misjudged the devastating impact of drugs entering these communities at the same time as economic prospects worsened. That narrative has misjudged the incalculable devastation of mass incarceration. That narrative has misjudged the significance of legislation in the 1960s. That narrative has misjudged history from the 1960s until now.

But here’s the thing. There were leaders in the 1960s who told us that the civil rights legislation was not enough. There were leaders who told us that LBJ’s Great Society legislation was important, but insufficient. There were leaders who repeatedly called for a federal jobs program. There were leaders who knew profit-seeking businesses would not create enough jobs for sustainable communities.

A. Phillip Randolph, the union leader who helped organize the March on Washington, said as much at the March in 1963. Bayard Rustin, the lead organizer of the March on Washington, said as much right after the March. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said as much in the years following his eloquent description of his dream. Even the controversial Daniel Patrick Moynihan said in 1967 that black Americans had been betrayed by the lack of additional legislative action.

But we as a nation did not listen. We did not listen because our racial and class prejudices could not avoid knee-jerk reactions to the race riots in the mid-and-late-1960s. We did not listen because we were shaken by the assassinations of MLK and RFK. We did not listen because we were torn asunder by anti-war protests and social change.

Over the next few decades, as we moved into the '70s and '80s, many of our larger cities experienced a shrinking tax base, while unemployment, drugs, crime, and police became larger problems. Then in 1996, William Julius Wilson published an important book titled *When Work Disappears*. There is much one can say about that book. There are some legitimate criticisms of it. Yet, his basic point stands: the economic breakdown of communities ripples into social breakdown. Wilson said we needed a massive jobs program to combat high unemployment among African Americans in our cities. Wilson contended that most of the social dysfunction was tied to economic deprivation.

But just as we didn't listen to Randolph, Rustin, and King 30 years earlier, we also didn't listen to Wilson. We misjudged movements. We misjudged movements because we don't want to take responsibility for the racialized poverty we have created in our cities. We misjudged movements because we conveniently forget that our troubled urban areas were created by segregation decades ago. We misjudged movements because it is easier for us to believe biased stereotypes about work and family. We misjudged movements because we don't want to rethink taxes, investment, and jobs. We misjudged movements because we thought these were problems unique to poor black people.

But now we know these are not "black problems." These are problems also experienced by whites. As more whites have struggled with unemployment, we've seen an increase in drug addiction. As more whites have struggled with social mobility, we've seen more family breakdown. As more whites have struggled with economic opportunities, we've seen health outcomes worsen. As more whites have struggled to find good jobs, we've seen suicides increase. As more whites have struggled in our economy, we've seen a significant increase in whites being incarcerated. It's almost as if these aren't "black problems" after all. It's almost as if these are human problems regardless of skin pigmentation. But the only reason we thought these were "black problems" in the first place was because of our misjudgments about race and class.

But these are not the only places where we've misjudged movements. We also have misjudged the movement of God. We have misjudged the movement of God because we didn't see that God is on the side of the oppressed. We have misjudged the movement of God because we have believed that God prefers our worship over justice. We have misjudged the movement of God because we have not listened to Isaiah 58. We have misjudged the movement of God because we have not listened to James 5. We have misjudged the movement of God because we have not listened to Jesus in Matthew 25. We have misjudged the movement of God because we have not listened to Jesus in Luke 4.

We have misjudged the movement of God because we thought "we" were the ones who were moral, and "they" were the ones who had a problem. We have misjudged the movement of God because we have been self-righteous in our racial prejudice. We have misjudged the movement of God because we have been self-righteous in our class prejudice. We must repent.

So let me tell you how my basketball story ended. We ended up tied for first place with that rival school. We had to play an extra game to decide the district championship. We had to play in their gym in front of their student body. Guess what happened? We dominated them! You know why? I changed my analysis. I backed off the press and played a 2-3 zone defense. They didn't get easy shots. We stopped their penetration, and we rebounded well. We won because I repented of my mistake and changed how I looked at the movements in the game.

Isaiah 58 promises God's presence and blessing if we change our analysis and our actions. Isaiah 58 promises that God will restore and rebuild if we will only stop misjudging movements. Isaiah 58 promises that God will make us repairers of the breach if we will only repent.