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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



A Resource for Building Empathy and Understanding

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The COVID-19 pandemic presents many challenges for professors and students who seek to practice inter-contextual biblical interpretation with a concern for social justice. Among them is the need to engage deeply and empathetically with people experiencing injustice at a time when the risk of serious illness rules out face-to-face interaction. Figuring out how to meet this challenge in a course on African American and womanist hermeneutics is one of the goals of a Wabash Center grant project that Dr. Mitzi J. Smith and I are codirecting.[i] In this post, I will begin by sharing a resource related to that goal.

Dr. Smith's design for a recent biblical hermeneutics course used video documentaries, Zoom-based interviews, and reading assignments to prepare students for interpreting the Gospel of Luke through the lens of home and homelessness. An especially valuable reading assignment was *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* by Matthew Desmond.[ii] This Pulitzer Prize winning ethnographic study weaves together the stories of eight families who became homeless while Desmond was living among them in two Milwaukee neighborhoods between May 2008 and June 2009. Desmond recorded the families' stories with their permission while acting as a friendly nonjudgmental neighbor. He describes them struggling to pay rent, avoid eviction, and find housing again after they had lost it. Readers who are interested in a scholarly study of eviction and homelessness can study Desmond's 68 pages of endnotes as well as an important epilogue in which he proposes policy solutions, but personal stories are

the heart of the book. They make Desmond's work compelling for students, deepening their empathy as well as their understanding.

In an end-of-course survey, we asked students to rate the impacts that various resources had on them, using a scale of 1 (very ineffective) to 4 (very effective). Students gave high marks to *Evicted* for its effectiveness in increasing their empathy for people experiencing homelessness (average 3.8) and in informing them about the causes, conditions, and possible solutions of homelessness (average 3.7).

The students' high ratings of *Evicted* are consistent with the impacts that we observed in their written work. Dr. Smith required them to share a key learning from each of the book's three main parts and a question for further discussion during the week just before our intensive Zoom meetings. Their messages reflected emotional and intellectual engagement with the struggles that Desmond described. The fact that many students also referred to *Evicted* in their final interpretive essays is significant because they were not specifically prompted to do so.

An excellent example is an essay titled "The Disciples Discriminate: A Contemporary Reading of Luke 18:15-17" by Amanda Bennett, an MDiv student at Bethany Theological Seminary who has given me permission to discuss her work here. Bennett read the story of disciples turning away children in the light of the discrimination faced by Arlene and her sons, Jori and Jafaris, as they searched for affordable housing in Milwaukee. Although housing discrimination against families with children is illegal in the US, it remains widespread, and Desmond shows that it was one of the barriers that blocked Arlene from finding permanent housing. She persisted with her applications despite repeated rejections, sometimes lying about how many children she had in order to have any hope of being considered. Finally, after eighty-nine rejections, she found a landlord who would "work with" her and her sons. Even then there was discrimination. Landlords face penalties if too many of their tenants dial 911, and Arlene's landlord objected after she called for an ambulance during one of Jafaris's asthma attacks. A few days later the police followed Jori home from school after he had an altercation with a teacher. At that point the landlord gave Arlene the choice of facing formal eviction or moving out immediately with a refund of her first month's rent and security deposit. She chose the refund.[iii] Bennett asked reasonably whether the teacher had engaged in racial discrimination when she decided to call the police instead of Arlene.

In Bennett's reading of Luke, Jesus offers essential resources such as food and healing. The families who bring children to Jesus are like Arlene, who persists in seeking resources for her children. Jesus' disciples are like white supremacist landlords, teachers, officers, judges, and health care workers, who discriminate against African American families and block them from getting the resources they need. Instead of the Sunday school image of a smiling white Jesus surrounded by children, Bennett imagined a dark-skinned Jesus sitting alone because his disciples have locked their arms to shut children out. She heard this Jesus confronting disciples today: "I will tell you over and over again, until you depart with your discriminatory ways. I welcome all." [iv] While applauding Bennett for her outstanding interpretive work, I also give

credit to Desmond for recording and publishing stories that sparked Bennett's analogical imagination.

Evicted has limitations. It is not recent enough to account for the current housing crisis due to COVID-19. Students also noted that Desmond is a relatively privileged white man and wondered how that background may have shaped his way of selecting and telling stories. Even so, *Evicted* clearly met our expectations as a resource for building empathy and helping students interpret Luke through the lens of home and homelessness. I would also use it in a course where students can interact face-to-face with people who lack permanent homes.

Notes

[i] For more information about this project, search for other blog posts by Drs. Mitzi J. Smith, Marcia Riggs, Mary Hess, and Daniel Ulrich, beginning with "Learning Womanist Hermeneutics during COVID-19" at <https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2020/07/learning-womanist-hermeneutics-during-covid-19/>.

[ii] Matthew Desmond, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* (New York: Broadway Books, 2016).

[iii] Desmond, *Evicted*, 231-32, 282, 285-87.

[iv] Amanda Bennett, "The Disciples Discriminate: A Contemporary Reading of Luke 18:15-17" (unpublished academic paper, August 20, 2020), 14.

<https://wabash.center/2020/11/a-resource-for-building-empathy-and-understanding/>