Chapter 7

Two More Considerations: Poverty and “Social Sin”

The Difference Poverty Makes

Gender alone does not make one more susceptible to contracting HIV. Neither does race or ethnicity or one’s sexual orientation. This is why commentary of “risk groups” is problematic in understanding and halting the spread of this particular virus. However, one significant environmental factor that does greatly increase one’s susceptibility to contracting this virus, as I have briefly mentioned throughout, is poverty.

The World Bank declares that deep poverty has direct impact on whether one is able to manage risk. Poverty is often gendered, raced, and otherwise further qualified. Barnett and Whiteside assert that disease distribution around the world is indicative of the distribution of the world’s poverty. Yet, in many cases it seems that neither clinical medicine nor public health nor religious communities spend sufficient funds or pay enough attention to what improves health and well-being for people and communities—access to nutritious food, clean water, sanitary living conditions, shelter from the environmental elements, education, general safety, preventative medicine and care, and release from impoverished conditions in general.

Religio-cultural-politico-socio-economic factors continue to shape the way the HIV & AIDS pandemic both unfolds and is talked about. One illustration of this is antiretroviral therapies (ARTs). Access to these seems literally to define “who is saved” and who is left to die from the disease and its impacts. Access comes down to economics.
HIV & AIDS is becoming the story of those “who can purchase well-being and those who cannot.”

Poverty decreases one’s access to and options for resources, education, employment, nutrition, and health care. Income difference is the biggest influence on health standards in a nation or area. Economic conditions make a difference in who becomes sick and with what. As the histories of the pandemic show, HIV & AIDS “does not follow the outlines of nation-states but rather matches the contours of a transnational socioeconomic order.”

Yet, identifying poverty as a major contributing factor is not quite nuanced enough. Other social forces and ideological structures already discussed influence who is at greatest risk of increased poverty and all that goes with it. These various influences come together in pernicious ways to create “risk environments,” increasing susceptibility of some people to contracting diseases such as HIV & AIDS in the twenty-first century.

“Risk Environments” and/as “Social Sin”

The tripartite oppressions of race–class–gender are something that womanist theologians and ethicists are famous for bringing to the attention of the theological community. In the case of HIV & AIDS, womanist theologians and ethicists were some of the lonely theological voices in the middle of the second decade of this pandemic. They largely maintain an emphasis on “breaking the silence” because of the continued threat of the disease/illness in their communities and the challenging history with the black church in the United States and this pandemic as noted already.

Breaking the silence and being informed continue to be important messages. President Obama’s Acting Against AIDS campaign reinforces this. But the way the conversation is framed often keeps talk of HIV & AIDS and sexuality in general within a matrix of “deviance” or “pathology” that is focused largely on individual personal responsibility. At worst, this tends to demonize sexuality; at best it maintains ambiguity, especially given that heterosexual sex is the main mode of transmission in the world, particularly among women of African descent, and it continues to locate the focus of the commentary in “risk behaviors” language. “Risk groups” also remain in focus as the “culprits” are often viewed as men who have sex with men in the African American communities or what is colloquially called men on the “Down Low” with their female partners as “unsuspecting victims.” However, womanist theologians and ethicists also provide a way