The taxing truth

By Debra Dean Murphy
September 21, 2011

1. It's not really about taxes, it's about our increasing contempt for the poor.

Critics of President Obama's deficit reduction plan insist that the wealthiest individuals and corporations should pay less in taxes than they do now. (Interesting, since many of the latter pay zero tax). *While at the same time* they grumble about the 50% of Americans who pay no income tax. What they fail to mention is that this 50% is comprised of persons who make less than $20k per year; the elderly barely getting by; and 17 million unemployed.

2. It's not really about health care, it's about our increasing contempt for the poor.

When the Tea Party audience cheered last week at the prospect of an uninsured man dying from a catastrophic disease, it was clear that the nuances of health care — real debate about honest differences in public policy — have been abandoned and the basest of our instincts and the worst of our prejudices have come to the fore. Why is it so galling to some that a poor person might need (and indeed deserves) medical care?

3. It's not really about the death penalty, it's about our increasing contempt for the poor.

Barring last-minute intervention by the U.S. Supreme Court (pretty unlikely), Troy Davis of Georgia will be executed Wednesday evening. A huge cloud of doubt hangs over his case. There's no forensic evidence linking him to the crime; numerous witnesses have recanted their testimony. A President, a Pope, a former FBI director and a host of others have pleaded for clemency but on Tuesday the Georgia parole board denied it.

"Ain't nobody with money on death row," observed Matthew Poncelet in the film adapation of Helen Prejean's *Dead Man Walking.* Davis is not only poor but black and in a highly-charged political season he's expendable — useful in the game of fearmongering, just one more dead criminal we're lucky to be rid of.

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In the New Testament, Jesus seems rather indifferent to paying taxes (though he loved tax collectors). In one confrontation about temple taxes he comically produces a fish with money in its mouth — enough to pay the bill. *Now can we get on to the business of the Kingdom?* he seems to say.

But Jesus has a lot to say about money and about the near impossibility of being both rich and faithful to the gospel. Of course,

we do all sorts of hermeneutical gymnastics to get around his straightforward directives about selling our stuff and all that – and I'm no literalist about them either. But clearly Jesus has what the liberation theologians call a "preferential option for the poor." Their treatment preoccupies his teaching, his love for them defines his ministry. He offers them salvation — *sozo* in Greek – which is not the saving of their souls but health (care) and well-being for their whole selves. They are not expendable, they are blessed. The kingdom of God is theirs.

None of the sad spectacle unfolding this week about taxes, health care, and the death penalty is about any of those things. Shamefully, it's about our increasing contempt for the poor and, just as tragically, our inability to name it as such.

Originally posted at Intersections.