

Where's the compassion? No substitute for justice: No substitute for justice

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President Bush may truly care about the poor and about people down on their luck, and he may want the public and private sectors to join in efforts to help. But his actions suggest he is engaged in what the *Wall Street Journal* calls a “war on the war on poverty.”

The latest evidence is the president’s budget proposals. Recommended spending caps not only erode the president’s own “No Child Left Behind” program, which holds schools accountable for academic achievement. The caps also slash funds from the WIC program for low-income mothers, and dramatically reduce funding for Head Start Community Development Block Grants, subsidized housing and Medicaid.

It may be too cynical to conclude that this administration deliberately sought generous tax cuts (which disproportionately benefited the wealthy) so that it could then argue there is not enough money to fund social programs. But the fact remains that Bush first took care of the wealthy, and now offers crumbs to the poor.

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that while pursuing these cuts the president is attempting to reinvigorate his faith-based initiative, which allows social-service funds to be channeled to churches and other faith-based organizations. This gesture toward the power of private-sector compassion is the spoonful of sugar to make the gutting of social programs and the cutting of social-service funds more palatable.

The poor need more than the kind of charity that nongovernmental organizations provide; they need the kind of social justice that only government can assure. Charity gives bread to hungry people; justice addresses the systemic causes of people going without food. The poor need affordable housing, access to preventive and curative health care, a solid education, job training and jobs, a livable wage and protection from discrimination.

The biblical understanding of justice derives from a generous God who liberated people from oppression and gave them a land flowing with milk and honey. Having been blessed by such a beneficent God, the people were to respond in kind—welcoming, protecting and aiding the poor, widows, orphans and resident aliens.

While biblical justice included charity for the needy, it also included means to even the playing field between rich and poor—affirmative action for those left out or left behind—such as the sabbatical year that liberated slaves and forgave debts. And the prophets castigated commercial practices that took advantage of the people already suffering.

As in the prophet Amos’s era, our problem is not a lack of piety in high places, but a gap between personal piety and public morality. Personal piety is no substitute for justice in the land.