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We face clear moral choices in priorities of our federal budget

by Peg Chamberlin

Perspective

Budgets are moral documents. I first heard that conviction while at a table of the National Council of Churches many decades ago. Against the backdrop of debt ceiling drama, sequestration politics and budget battles, it is a vital call today. This conviction has been the consistent message from America's faith leaders across the theological and ideological spectrum. And it is a drum we will continue to beat until our elected officials listen. The budgets crafted by our leaders are not obscure Washington documents. They impact human lives and have real consequences, and they should reflect the values we hold as a nation.

One example of the clear moral choices we face in our federal budget is highlighted in the new report "Faithful Budget, Faithful Stewardship," released by the National Council of Churches. The report details how current policies are giving \$10.17 billion in tax breaks and subsidies to the oil, gas and coal industry. For members of Congress who say they are concerned about deficits and the national debt, this would seem an obvious place to find savings. Instead, Congress has proposed slashing spending by \$3.86 billion for vital social safety net programs that exist largely to ensure low-income children have access to proper health care, to food, to homes with adequate heating and cooling, and to early education.

Cutting fossil fuel subsidies and tax breaks would more than cover the cost of these programs that benefit millions of children every year while leaving more than \$6 billion that could go toward vital infrastructure projects and paying down the national debt. Additionally, it would mark a significant step in breaking our country's crippling dependence on fossil fuels. These are the choices we face: Will we prioritize programs that help children and working families struggling to get by, or tax loopholes that benefit an industry making record profits?

The importance of these choices is made all the more clear at a time when one in three Americans live below or near the poverty line. Today in America the best way to define poverty is not by how little people have, but by how hard they have to work to stay afloat. More than 7 million Americans are working two or more jobs just to make ends meet. Twenty-six million are paid so little that even working full time they'd still live below the poverty line. Add to these realities the fact that as people's incomes decrease, the obstacles they face increase. Poorer populations often lack access to affordable health care, child care and cheap healthy food (making the programs highlighted in the National Council of Churches report all the more important). Meanwhile, they are also more likely to pay extra fees for banking services, credit cards and loans.

Some may say that it is the role of the church, not government, to care for the poor. But overcoming these challenges requires more than church-run soup kitchens and free clinics. Churches can do a lot to alleviate immediate suffering, but these problems encompass broad structural issues where economies of scale often make national solutions more effective than local ones. This is how Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security have been able to provide a lifeline to millions at a fraction of the administrative costs of private alternatives. In the face of these realities, is it really the Christian response to say we should cut funding to programs that are often people's last lifeline? If a person was drowning, would you take away his life preserver and then say someone should have taught him to swim?

Too often our debates over our budget and social safety net programs have been cast along political and ideological lines, left vs. right, or those who favor more government and those opposed. But poverty is not a left or right issue. It exists in red states and blue states, in the suburbs, inner city and rural countryside. And as Christians, we should not let partisan ideology supersede our moral obligation. Too many Americans are just one paycheck, one major hospitalization, one emergency away from having the bottom fall out. They need a fighting chance. They need leaders who will fight for them.

The nature of our democracy is that it reflects the values of who we are as a people. Just as when Jesus said, "Where our treasure is, there our hearts will be also," the choices we make together about spending as a nation reflect our priorities and values. Our budgets are moral documents. When politicians talk about cutting funding to programs that support the working poor in order to protect tax breaks for big oil, they are arguing we should take from the poor to benefit the rich.

Early in Luke, Jesus is given a scroll of Hebrew scripture to read. It is Isaiah 61: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor." Isaiah is speaking to the political authorities of his day, calling on them to reflect God's concern for the poor in the kingdom's actions. The king is Isaiah's political leader, who is responsible for the overall well-being of the people. Jesus announces that he came to see that this ministry -- to call for justice -- is fulfilled. Can we do anything less?

[Peg Chamberlin is the executive director of the Minnesota Council of Churches and the immediate past president of the National Council of Churches. This article is part of an Oxfam America initiative to focus greater attention on poverty and low-wage work in America. Learn more.]

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