

Justice Demands
Deuteronomy 24:14-22
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I have a confession to make, and church seems like a pretty good place to confess. One of the most difficult things for me in ministry is dealing with the folks that contact us asking for help. Not church members, of course, but non-members who call or come to the church and need gas money or a place to stay or food or help paying their utilities. I always find these encounters very challenging.

For one thing, the sad truth is there are a fair number of folks who go around scamming churches, and I know for a fact that I have been scammed on more than one occasion, even though we have a strict rule to never give out cash. So I begin most of these contacts feeling suspicious. Another thing is, these calls for help always seem to come just when I am busiest—when I'm on my way out the door, or when my to do list has reached epic lengths. So not only do I begin my conversation with the person asking for help feeling suspicious, I often start off feeling (this is the ugly truth) irritated and resentful.

But whenever I find myself getting impatient, I remind myself that Jesus calls me—calls all of us—to help these folks, and that to care for one of them is to care for Jesus himself. And I also remember one of my first encounters with someone coming to the church for help. I was still in seminary, the student associate pastor at a church. A woman came by the church asking for help with rent. As I talked with her and got some information, I realized she lived miles away. I knew there were many churches right in

her own neighborhood, so I asked why she hadn't gone to any of those churches for help. I will never forget how she shrugged and said, "Oh those churches don't help."

Now I have no idea if the woman was right or not—if it was really true that those churches don't help, but that phrase has stayed with me. "Those churches don't help."

As a church, as Christians, we do not have an option when it comes to helping the least, the last, and the lost among us. There are more than 3000 verses in the Bible that deal with wealth and poverty, injustice, and oppression, and with what the response of God's people should be. The Bible talks more about caring for the poor and about economic justice than anything else except idolatry.

Some of the most interesting of those 3000+ verses on caring for the poor are found in the book of Deuteronomy. Now there are few, if any of us, who will name Deuteronomy as our favorite book in the Bible, and admittedly, parts of it are hard going, unless you like reading about the proper way to make animal sacrifice or laws regarding levitical priests. But it is an amazing book, and one of the most important in all the scriptures. It is framed as Moses' farewell speech to the children of Israel. He has led them out of slavery in Egypt, and for forty years they have been wandering in the wilderness. Now, he is about to die, while at last they are ready to enter the land that God has promised them. But before they cross the River Jordan into their new homeland, Moses outlines how God wants them to live in this new land. Deuteronomy is God's blueprint for how just and caring and faithful societies are to order their lives.

In particular, Deuteronomy is *very* concerned about the treatment of the poor. Our passage for today is just one example:

Deuteronomy 24:14-22

14 You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns. 15 You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them; otherwise they might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt. 16 Parents shall not be put to death for their children, nor shall children be put to death for their parents; only for their own crimes may persons be put to death. 17 You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow's garment in pledge. 18 Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this. 19 When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings. 20 When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. 21 When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. 22 Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this.

Do you hear the careful concern for the poor and defenseless? Employers are forbidden to take advantage of their workers. The most vulnerable members of society—the widow, the orphan, and the outsider—are specifically protected. And gleaning sounds to me remarkably like a 3500 year old welfare system, a system for providing food and sustenance for the poorest members of the community.

One of the interesting things about Deuteronomy is that it is in many ways it is one of the most capitalistic books in the Bible. Deuteronomy spends a lot of time outlining property rights and laws for commercial transactions. It seems pretty clear that God wants God's people to be materially successful. The motto of Deuteronomy could be borrowed from Dr. Spock and the other Vulcans on *Star Trek*: Live long and prosper. Deuteronomy says that God wants God's people to live long and prosper.

But at the same time, there is a clear recognition that economic prosperity should never come at the expense of others. Despite Deuteronomy's concern with protecting and upholding property rights, it also establishes clear limits. One person's prosperity should never come at the expense of someone less fortunate.

For instance, Deuteronomy prohibits charging interest on loans. This is because the only ones who needed loans were the poor. It wasn't like today where almost all of us are in some sort of debt. Then only the poor had to borrow. To charge interest would be to force them further into poverty.

We also see this limitation on property rights when it comes to the collateral that was offered to secure the loan. It was the custom for those receiving a loan to pledge one of their few possessions, often their cloak. Deuteronomy says if a poor man pledges his cloak, you can have it during the day, but you have to give it back to him at night, so he doesn't suffer from the cold.

Or look at the laws on gleaning. Landowners certainly have the right to grow and harvest their crops, but they can't maximize their profits if it means their neighbor will go hungry. They have an obligation to leave something for the poor.

Deuteronomy preaches prosperity, but also insists that prosperity is not just for the select few. Prosperity is God's will for the community as a whole and for everyone that is within it. As long as any one in the community is hungry or homeless, then the community, as a whole, has failed. It doesn't matter if some or even most are doing well—the well-being of the community is judged by the poorest members.

As we continue our series on urban poverty, I think Deuteronomy raises some significant and potentially troubling questions for us. I am confident that none of us would deny that the calling of individual Christians is to care for the poor. I am confident that none of us would deny that the calling of us as a church is to care for the poor. But where Deuteronomy challenges us is to think not just about ourselves as individuals or as members of a congregation, but as members of the community. The demand of

Deuteronomy is the demand to create just communities. Communities where everyone has enough to eat and a decent, safe place to live.

If Deuteronomy is God's blueprint for creating a just community, how does Omaha stack up against the deuteronomic yardstick? Despite being a wealthy city in the wealthiest nation in the world, Omaha does not stack up too well.

- Every night 2,000 persons in Omaha are homeless.
- The average age of a homeless person in Omaha is 9.
- 15% of Omaha children live in poverty.
- Among the 100 major metropolitan areas in the US, Omaha has the third highest rate of black poverty.
- Omaha ranks number 1 in the country in the percentage of African American children living in poverty – six out of ten African American children in Omaha live under the federal poverty line. That means we are worse than Los Angeles or Chicago or New York City. We are even worse than New Orleans.

What we do as individuals and as a church is incredibly, incredibly important. I wish we could just stop there, because it would be so much easier.

But God's voice as it speaks in the book of Deuteronomy won't let it stop there. God doesn't just call us to be just and caring individuals. God calls us to create just and caring communities. God doesn't judge Omaha by our Fortune 500 companies, or a beautiful downtown or the impressive number of millionaires per capita. God isn't impressed that we are Warren Buffet's hometown. God judges us by the 15 % of our children living in poverty. God doesn't want to know about what new skyscraper or ball

field we are going to build. God wants to know what we are going to do about the enormous and growing economic gap between black and white in our town.

Deuteronomy challenges us to think about poverty systemically, even politically. To learn about and work to change the systems that perpetuate generation after generation of poverty. To learn about and work to change systems where families are one paycheck or one catastrophic medical illness away from economic disaster. Now I am aware that we may have immense differences in opinion in how we understand these systems and what should be done to fix them. That's fine. These are enormously complex problems and there are no easy answers.

But we cannot go to sleep at night in our safe, comfortable homes and just forget about the least among us. I began by confessing my discomfort and even irritation in dealing with those who come to the church asking for help. Deep down, I think what really bothers me about those encounters is that I'm forced to confront the depth of need in our city. I can't close my eyes or turn away—not when there's a desperate mother sitting across from me who can't feed her kids.

And I ask myself—why her and not me? Maybe I made some wise choices, and she made some bad ones, but there's more to it than that. I had parents who loved and believed in me. I had a church community that supported me, financially and spiritually. I had the benefits of a stable family and good education and good health. I've never been without a job for any length of time. I've never had to wonder where my next meal, or my kids' next meal was coming from. From the moment of my birth, I have incredibly, undeservedly blessed.

Deuteronomy's urgent insistence on caring for the least among us is rooted in this sense of blessedness, in this sense of God's grace. *Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and that God saved you.*

We have been blessed. Now God demands that we go forth to create a community of blessing and grace and love and justice for all.