

Give Me Your Tired, Your Poor

5th Sunday in Lent – April 1/2, 2006

Sermon Background Study

Deuteronomy 15:1-11 (NRSV)

Every seventh year you shall grant a remission of debts. ²And this is the manner of the remission: every creditor shall remit the claim that is held against a neighbor, not exacting it of a neighbor who is a member of the community, because the LORD's remission has been proclaimed. ³Of a foreigner you may exact it, but you must remit your claim on whatever any member of your community owes you. ⁴There will, however, be no one in need among you, because the LORD is sure to bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you as a possession to occupy, ⁵if only you will obey the LORD your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today. ⁶When the LORD your God has blessed you, as he promised you, you will lend to many nations, but you will not borrow; you will rule over many nations, but they will not rule over you.

⁷If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. ⁸You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. ⁹Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, "The seventh year, the year of remission, is near," and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing; your neighbor might cry to the LORD against you, and you would incur guilt. ¹⁰Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. ¹¹Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land."

In the midst of all the violence and bloodshed in the story of the ancient Israelites, it is easy to lose sight of what God really wanted from them and from us. Today, we'll consider the concrete compassion, the love, that is to distinguish the people of God from all others.

A member of our congregation wrote me this week after reading the book of Numbers: "I must tell you, though, that I was really bothered by reading Numbers and about the slaughter of the Midianites. I understand why Moses advocates killing the men and the sinful women. However, why does he say to kill all of the boys as well? And God condones this? This is troublesome."

Who among us isn't troubled by such stories? And there is more to come as we read through Joshua, Judges, Samuel and the rest. Some of these stories are so shocking and troubling that they can blind us to the message that we ought to hear in these books.

It is very hard for us to comprehend just how different the world of the ancient Near East was from our own. Life was brutal, short, and cheap. It was a world in which "an eye for an eye" was moral progress. Abraham isn't shocked when God tells him to sacrifice Isaac because child sacrifice was practiced by some of the cultures in and around Canaan. Only half-jokingly, I suggest to my students that they try to imagine the world of Conan the Barbarian!

If we imagine well, if we really come to grips with life in the ancient world, then we'll find that it is not the bloodshed that shocks us. Rather, we are surprised by God's demands for

The Year of Jubilee

Every seventh year was to be a Sabbath year for the Israelites (Lev. 25:4; Deut. 15:1). Fields were to lie fallow and debts were to be forgiven. After the passing of seven Sabbath years, there was to be a Year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25:11-12). Thus, every fiftieth year was Jubilee.

The Jubilee year was announced with a blast on the ram's horn on the Day of Atonement. It was a holy year – set apart for God. Jubilee was a proclamation of freedom. All land was returned to its ancestral owners and all Israelite indentured servants were to be freed. Leviticus provides means of redemption for those who had indentured themselves to pay off a debt and even tells how to calculate the amounts to be paid.

In many ways, this is the most shocking and subversive of all the Torah teachings. We can hardly imagine an economic system working in which all land simply returned to its ancestral families every fifty years. We can see how such a practice would work to preserve these ancient families. But still, as Walter Brueggemann put it, Jubilee was a "daring act of ethical imagination." The land is truly God's, so how could it be owned forever (Lev. 25:23-24)? Even the families were merely God's tenants, his trustees. And if the land belonged to God, so did the people. God created us to be free – free to love, to worship, to serve, and to learn.

compassion, generosity, and justice for even the weakest persons. The community of God's people was to be dramatically different from any community, society, or culture the world had yet seen.

"What does the LORD, your God, require of you?" (Deuteronomy 10:12)

For all the attention devoted in these OT books to priests and sacrificial rituals, what does God really want from his people? Moses spells it out in Deuteronomy 10: "Live in his presence in holy reverence, follow the road he sets before you, love him, serve GOD, your God, with everything you have in you. Obey the commandments and regulations of GOD . . ." (from Peterson's *The Message*).

Even the rite of circumcision, the sign of the covenant given to Abraham, is only a signpost to the heart. "Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart," Moses tells them. God doesn't play favorites or take bribes. God looks after the widows and orphans. God even takes care of the strangers, providing them with food and clothing. God's people are to love strangers in the same way. For the Jews, life is to be one long training class on loving as God loves.

But how is this love to play out in practice? As Jesus would teach more than a millennia later, true love is lived out, it is practiced – it lies in the doing, not the feeling. Let's take a look at some of the "love-practices" that Moses spells out in the sermon called Deuteronomy.

- The Israelites are to set apart a tithe of all their agricultural production. Some is to be used for the benefit of the Levite priests who have no land or livestock of their own. Further, "the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns may come and eat their fill so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake." (Deut. 14:22-29)
- Every seventh year is to be a Sabbath year in which debts are to be forgiven. The people are always to be open-handed with those in need and willing to lend. God cautions them that they are not to get stingy as the Sabbath year approaches when debts will be forgiven. They are always to give liberally and ungrudgingly. Remember – this is more than 3,000 years ago. It surely doesn't much square with the world of Conan! (15:1-11)
- Slaves are to be freed in the seventh year and given a head start on their new life. (15:12-18)
- Judges are to be appointed. They are to judge fairly and honestly. They are not to play favorites or twist the law. "Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue . . ." (16:18-19).
- If they see their neighbor's livestock wandering away, they are to do something about it, not turn a blind eye. This is about the pro-active caring for others. (22:1-4)
- They are to lend without interest. If they make a vow, they are to keep it. They can eat the grapes or corn from a neighbor's vines or field – but only what they need on the spot. There is sharing and there is stealing. (23:19-25)
- If a poor person pledges their cloak as collateral for a loan, the cloak is to be returned to them at sunset so they don't have to be cold at night. A widow's garment is never to be taken in pledge.
- The wages of poor and needy workers are to be paid each day. (24:14-15)
- If some of the harvest is accidentally left in the field, it must stay there so it can be picked up by the "alien, the orphan, and the widow." Likewise, some olives are to be left on the trees and grapes on the vines. (24:19-22)

Love large and small

One of the most striking things about this list is that some of these compassionate acts are big, like freeing slaves, but others are so small, such as returning a poor person's cloak at night if they've pledged it as collateral. It may be hard to imagine living in the brutal world of the ancient near east, but it isn't very hard to see in this brief list a challenge to us in our own day and world. The particulars may have changed, but the call to justice and generosity in all aspects of our lives and toward all people – neighbor and stranger, near and far, friend and enemy, strong and weak – is undiminished. We are to lovingly care for those who are least able to care for themselves, while always remembering that God cares for us in just this way. Thanks be to God!

Thru the Bible Daily Bible Readings

April 2 - 8

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.

Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Deuteronomy 31-34; Psalm 49 Joshua becomes Moses' successor; Moses' final blessing and death.</p>	<p>Day 2 James 1-2; Psalm 50 James was Jesus' half-brother. You probably find that this letter sounds more like Jesus than anything else outside the Gospels.</p>
<p>Day 3 James 3-5; Psalm 51 James is focused on the living out of our faith. His is a "theology of the hands."</p>	<p>Day 4 Joshua 1-3; Psalm 52 God commissions Joshua and preparations for the invasion of Canaan begin; Rahab helps the invaders</p>
<p>Day 5 Joshua 4-6; Psalm 53 After crossing the Jordan, a new generation is circumcised as a sign of their commitment; the battle of Jericho</p>	<p>Day 6 A day for reflection and catching up</p>
<p>Day 7 Joshua 7-9; Psalm 54 The sin of Achan and its aftermath; the capture of Ai; the Gibeonites save themselves by trickery</p>	

Sermon Notes

Reading *Thru the Bible* with us? Got Questions? Want to go deeper?

When we begin to read the Bible regularly, questions pile up fast. A good study Bible can help. And our library has some excellent commentaries. But it is very helpful, even essential, to explore these questions with other Christians. We read Scripture well when we read it as a community.

In Scott Engle's Sunday morning class we'll be talking each week about the Bible readings from the week before. We'll seek to gain a better understanding of the readings and what they mean for us.

We hope you'll join us as we journey through the entire Bible this year.

Scott's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.

If you are not a part of a Sunday morning class, we hope that you'll visit our class. It is open to adults of all ages. We have more than ten small groups meeting now and a growing number of opportunities to meet other members of the St. Andrew community. If you are new to St. Andrew, the class is a great way to begin getting connected. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott Engle at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at sengle@standrewccl.org.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

What do you imagine the ancient world to have been like? How do you imagine it was most different from our own experience? When we read these Old Testament books how might we better understand the world in which Moses and the rest lived?

Read over the list of "love-practices" that I culled from Deuteronomy. What are three themes that you find common to these teachings? Which of the teachings would be most difficult for you to follow? Why would the "big" stuff be intermingled with the seemingly "little" stuff? Is the "little" stuff really little?

How could we translate these practices into our own lives? You might go down the list one by one and see if you could create a teaching suitable for our world that would flow from these ancient instructions. Be specific . . . Moses certainly was!

Finally, this week's Scripture passage is a good occasion to ask ourselves how we are doing on the "OUT" dimension of our discipleship. Looking back over the last years, in what meaningful ways have you served others, fed or clothed the needy, cared for the marginalized and oppressed, and pursued justice? Many of us realize that we fall pretty far short of doing what we could. How could we do better?