

Deuteronomy 24:17-22
8th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon Series: Bible Stories
Widows and Orphans – Love for Neighbors

Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church
Winchester, VA
Pastor Paul Krueger
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¹⁷ Do not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge. ¹⁸ Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there. That is why I command you to do this.

¹⁹ When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. ²⁰ When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. ²¹ When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. ²² Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this.

Grace and peace to you from our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our lessons today all focus on the theme: Love Your Neighbor. In our Gospel text, an expert in the law asked Jesus, **Who is my neighbor?** to which Jesus responded with the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus' answer then, was a little indirect. He didn't tell the man, "This is who your neighbors are," He tells him, "This is what it looks like to be a neighbor, going out and helping whomever is in need, regardless of who they are. Now, go and do it."

Some people—whether at the time of Jesus, the time of Moses, or even today—are in greater need than others. In our lesson from Deuteronomy, Moses identifies three such groups of people: the homeless, the widows, and the orphans. These are people whose lives no longer follow conventional norms. Some circumstance or circumstances have led to an increased need for them. When God gave the Israelites laws concerning foreigners He wasn't talking about foreigners in the sense we might think of them (folks from Europe or Asia coming in on vacation) what He's talking about are people who might be more closely identified by another word from our vernacular: refugees. He's talking about people who through political turmoil, famine, or war had been displaced from their homes. They had no land to call their own; they were sojourners and wanderers; they were homeless. For the widows it was the untimely death of their husbands that had affected them both financially and socially. Now, some widows were better off than others, they had family who was able to provide for them after their husband's death. Others weren't so fortunate. For those without family the death of their husband meant complete loss of social and economic support. They were left without land or means of income. And then there were the orphans. Like the widows and sojourners, they had no land. Without land they had no home. Without a home, they had nowhere to plant, nowhere to work, and no way to provide for a family. They were completely at the mercy of others.

"Remember these people," the Lord directs us, "and care for them, for you were once worse off than they." At the time of Moses, He reminded His people of the Exodus: **Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there. That is why I command you to do this.** Raise your hand if you were ever a slave in Egypt. Not so many of us here. So perhaps we need more poignant motivation. How about this? Raise your hand if you were ever a slave to Satan, to sin, to death and hell. Yeah, that's all of us, isn't it?

And in that slavery, you had no home, you were simply sojourning here for a limited time, with nowhere to rest when your time here was through. You had no worth, you had no hope, you had absolutely nothing. And yet, from that slavery, you and I have been redeemed. We have crossed over from death to life through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. In Him, we who once had nothing now have everything!

But do we live like that? Do we live like we are the richest people in the world? Because we are! We are the children the heirs of the Lord God Almighty. And yet it's easy, all too easy, to forget about that, to forget about all our amazing spiritual possessions and riches that God our Savior has blessed us with and to focus only our physical possessions. "My things, my stuff, my money, these are what are most important. I have earned them, and they are mine, and I will guard them as such." We either become misers saving up every cent that we can—going back over all the olive branches and grape vines and making sure every last sheaf of grain is gathered into storage—and we sit on our accumulated wealth with increasing feelings of safety and security, or we become extravagant spenders, turning all of our wealth into things through the magic of commerce and then those things become the source of our sense of security or worth.

Our enemy the devil loves nothing more than for us to fall prey to the thinking that stuff and money is what it's all about in this world. It is not. God's love is what it's all about. God's love is where true security comes from. God's love is where we find true worth and value. God's love, at the end of the day, or more pointedly, at the Last Day, is the only commodity worth anything. And how much of God's love do you have? You have all of it. So much that He sent His Son to die on the cross in your place so that you may live with Him forever.

We are embarrassingly rich when it comes to God's love, the only kind of richness that matters, so if we can remember that. If we can remember the spiritual poverty we were in which God has rescued us from through our Baptisms and His Word, then that's going to liberate us to do some pretty incredible things with our worldly wealth.

We don't have to sit on every last penny we make or spend every cent on more things for ourselves because wealth and things aren't the be all and end all. The be all and end all is love. When we remember how God in His love has rescued us from our sins, then we're able to use our wealth to love. We're able to set aside from what we earn to support the work of a local church where God's Word is preached and His Sacraments are administered. We're able to support local charities that care for the needs of the people in our community. We're able to help establish missions on the other side of the globe. And perhaps most importantly, one that I think we certainly need to emphasize more, we can use our worldly wealth to make friends, to be hospitable, to have fun with and connect with other people, to build relationships with them so that we know when they are in need and we're able to help them in that time.

Two weeks ago, at Camp Chi Rho, I picked on one of our younger campers named Aida during our closing worship service. Aida's parents and younger brother had come up from Baltimore to pick her up so they were sitting next to her during the service. My sermon text was the lesson from Mark 9 where Jesus holds a little child in front of His disciples and tells them, **Whoever welcomes one of these little children in My name welcomes Me; and whoever welcomes Me does not welcome Me but the one who sent Me** (Mk 9:37). I asked Aida if she loved her little brother Owen who sitting there next to her, just a toddler still, maybe three or four years old.

Aida answered, "Yes," she did love her brother.

So then I asked her why. "Why, Aida? Why would you love your little brother? What do you get out of that? We love our parents, sure, but think about everything they do for us!

Little brothers though? Does he make you taller, faster, or stronger? Does he make you smarter or better looking? Does he make you more successful or more popular with your friends? Of course not. He does absolutely nothing for you because he's a 3-year-old and he's a freeloader! Is that accurate?"

And again, Aida answered, "Yeah."

So I asked again, "Why then? Why do love him? What's in it for you?"

And Aida said, "I don't know."

What does loving your neighbor do for you? What does your neighbor do for you? What's in it for you to care for a homeless person, a widow, an orphan, anyone really who is in need, who because of their current circumstances they are not able to provide for themselves. What's in it for you to show love to them in the form of a meal, financial assistance, or a room in your home? Do you know?

Here's what I know. I shared it with the kids at camp and I'd like to share it with you too. The answer to the question, "What do we get when we love people who don't do anything for us, what do we get out of expending our time and energy even our personal wealth to demonstrate our love to them?" is *not* nothing, but rather it's joy.

Joy is an emotion that God gives us. It isn't really the same as happiness. Happiness comes and goes, but joy is yours forever. That's because happiness comes from things in this world, from our immediate surroundings which are always changing, but joy comes from something that never changes. Joy comes from God's love. When you know God's love, and you remember it, that He rescued you from slavery to sin, you feel joy. The more you dwell on it the more you study His word and His promises and His love the more joy you get. And that joy sticks with you even when times are not happy, even when you're sad. The really neat thing when it comes to joy, is that we don't just get joy from learning about how much God loves us, we get joy when we share God's love with others.

We get joy when we love our useless little siblings, our parents, our children. We get joy when we help our Christian family, especially those who are in need. We get joy when we love and serve complete strangers. We get joy when we love our neighbor, going out and helping whomever is in need, regardless of who they are. So let's go do it!

Amen.