

TEXT: Deuteronomy 24:17-22

THEME: WE LOVE, BECAUSE HE LOVES

1. By maintaining justice and mercy in justice
2. By selflessly providing for the basic provisions of those in need

DATE: Sunday, July 18, 2010 - Pentecost 8 - CWS Series C

Dear people of God, who love, because he first loved you:

For many reasons God has always wanted his people to show their love to their neighbors, be they enemies or best friends. This morning I want to begin by telling you a story that was made possible because of the very commands and promises God made in our lesson from Deuteronomy.

Long before the Savior's coming and ascension, God's evangelism strategy for his people was a "come" strategy. That is, as foreigners would come to the land of Israel whether to work, vacation, or live, they would learn of God's love and his promise through contact with this people. Yet even so, there were times in the Old Testament when God would scatter his people so that in this way too the promise of his love and a Savior would spread even to the Gentiles. Today, we'd call that a "go" strategy.

And so it happened that famine drove Elimelech and his wife Naomi to Moab, a Gentile nation east of the Jordan River and Dead Sea. While there, their two sons married Moabite women, but soon after, both Elimelech and his sons died, leaving all three women widows. One of the women, named, Orpah, decided to stay in Moab, but the other one, named Ruth, decided by faith, that she was going to return to her spiritual homeland with her mother-in-law, Naomi. As this young Gentile widow Ruth was gleaning in the fields to provide for her and her mother-in-law, she caught the eye of her future husband, Boaz, who as owner of the fields was especially generous in leaving grain behind in his harvested fields. They were eventually married and Boaz and Ruth, who remember was a Gentile, became the great grandparents of King David and consequently the ancestors of Jesus the Savior. So once again, we see that as God's people provided for the needs of others, God through their efforts also provided for his people what he had promised them.

Before we consider the laws and the love which made this account and our salvation a reality, we need to have some other knowledge. The first is how these Old Testament civic or government rules affect or apply to us who live in the New Testament under secular governments. And the other is to understand some of things God assumed when giving the two laws we are studying this morning.

So first, remember that all of us are *by faith* the children of God or spiritual Israel. We are guided by the command of the moral law, the 10 commandments, to show love as Jesus' summary of that law taught us. He said that the law has two sections and each is summarized by the command to love: love God above all things and love your neighbor as yourself. So, these Old Testament laws, even the civic ones, instruct and enlighten us about God's will for the way he wants us to show love to others.

Note very well, however, that both in the Old Testament as well as in the New, God made it clear to his people that the cause and propellant of their love, was the love he first showed them. St. John reminds us of this in his first letter: *We love him, because he first loved us.* So it is true on a wider scale: WE LOVE, BECAUSE HE LOVES. And we can see the timeless, consistency of that truth as we study Deuteronomy 24 this morning.

But again, before we do that, we need to understand the other thing I mentioned. There are a few assumptions that God made when he gave these laws to his people. The one is that those who are able to work do so and not take advantage of the generosity of others. God's welfare system made no provisions for those able to work. St. Paul repeated this for us in his first letter to the believers in Thessalonica: *If any would not work, he shall not eat.* The second assumption of these laws is that the family was to be the primary support and care group in society. Families were to take care of each other, especially when they were in need. So also St. Paul reminds young men in families, that if they do not take care of their own families first, they are worse than unbelievers. These are certain basic acts of love that the believer will not forsake or forget.

With that understood, listen to what God commanded his people through Moses. (READ v. 17). The first thing you need to hear in these words is that God was not addressing "you" in the collective, as in, "all y'all." God was addressing "you" in the singular. This is how he wanted each person in Israel to treat foreign travelers and visitors as well as those who wanted to live in their territory. In addition it addressed how God wanted each of his people to treat their own fellow Jewish citizens, who had been orphaned or widowed and left without family to care for them. The keeping of these commands was the responsibility of the individual, not of the nation as a whole.

Notice then also that the people addressed were people who could easily have slipped through the ranks and fallen to the ground of society and been trampled by others more blessed. It would be easy to identify the foreigners and ignore them and even to mistreat them. It would be easy to ignore the widows and orphans and to treat them as second class citizens since they couldn't pay for justice. Our own country and its history provide ample proof that this can happen.

But God did not want this for his people. He didn't want them withholding justice from these kinds of people when they were victims of crime nor did he want his people dealing unmercifully in their businesses transactions with these kinds of people in need of financial help. Rather, God wanted his people to insure that especially the foreigners and widows and orphans received fair trials in court. This usually meant that the town elders who frequently gathered at the city gate to conduct business and legal matters, were not to ignore the needs and claims of these people but to give them the same equal treatment they would give to their friends. The individual citizen was to insist on this. This is how he would show his love.

However, God also wanted these town elders and business people to show mercy, especially to the widows, when loaning them money. It was typical that while a person owed money, he would show up every morning to hand his outer coat or sandals to the lender and then return in the evening to collect them so that he would not freeze while he slept at night. Those without the outer garments or sandals could quickly be identified as debtors or people who owed money. But when it came to the widows, those who had no men in their family to provide for them, God wanted the business leaders and elders to show mercy to them and not to make their already tough situation worse. The widows would be allowed to keep their outer coats or sandals even if they borrowed and owed money. Again, the individual citizen was to insist on this. This is how he would show his love.

This was the command, but God knew that that command in itself gave the individual no reason to keep it, no power or desire to keep it. That is why he didn't end with the command. He continued: (READ v. 18). Remember who you were! Remember what I did for you! And obey my command.

Now this is interesting! Very few of the people to whom Moses was speaking these words, except Moses, Caleb and Joshua, had lived in Egypt; those who had would have been children at the time. By this time they would have been 40-50 years old and the oldest living people in Israel. Therefore, the majority of the people who heard these words, never knew slavery in Egypt or the great display of God's power that had freed them. Nevertheless, God considers them all as redeemed from Egypt. And they were because even those who never lived in Egypt had been freed from brutal Egyptian slavery because they were the children and heirs of those who had been. With these words God reminded his people that he always sees them as a living people. So also Jesus reminds us that he is a God of the living, not of the dead.

This too then is how God sees you. You are his child. And though you don't have a physical or genetic connection to Old Testament Israel, you do have a spiritual connection to them. You are children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. You are Abraham's children because he is the father of all who believe. You are the true Israel of God. But remember what you were!

You were slaves to sin and to the tyranny of the devil. You were slaves to death who ruled over you. You could once do nothing but what God hated and nothing but what they devil would tempt you to do. You were like animals jerked about on the devil's chain and doomed to be death's prisoners forever.

But remember then what God did for you; how he saved you with his own outstretched arm! He freed you from slavery in Egypt and so also, from the brutal slavery to sin, devil and death. God saved you from such slavery through the death of the first born, the first-born son of Mary, who is your Passover Lamb and substitute. Through the blood of this Lamb of God shed on the cross and painted on the door posts of your heart by baptism through faith, God has freed you by passing over you in his wrath and by showing his mercy and love instead.

It is this mercy and love, first shown to you, that God wants you to show others, especially those who can be easily overlooked and mistreated by our society. Maintain justice. Be fair in your dealings with everyone. And as you have opportunity elect and support leaders and judges who will do this too. Then as you conduct business with other people be merciful to those in need. Show love and mercy to them, not because they are always so deserving, but precisely because God loved you when you were undeserving and because he still does.

Because he is generous, God wanted generosity to be the identifying mark of his people. (READ 19-22). Though God provides 3 examples, the grain, grape and olive growers, the examples are essentially the same. As God would bless the land to produce crops, his people were not only to return to him the first tenth of the produce; they were also not to greedily and selfishly sweep through their fields, groves or vineyards a second time to pick up what they had missed, either by accident or on purpose. They were to leave some of the ripe crops behind so that those who were in need would have a place to gather what they needed to survive.

Those of you who have tomato bushes or citrus trees or avocado trees understand God's command. There's no way your family could possibly eat everything those plants could produce. There is usually plenty for several families. This would also be true even if you farmed these plants for business. You could still make a decent living from these plants if you picked them only once or twice a year, and left the rest for others to pick or gather, since many of them produce year-round in our Mediterranean-like climate.

As a side note, did you notice God's consistency? Though God was providing for those in need by ordering his people not to clean sweep their fields and groves, he still required that those in need get up and get into the harvested

fields to collect their provisions. He didn't deliver it to their doorstep; he required them also to work for their living.

And once again he provided the reasoning for his command. He said quite personally, "You will remember that you were a slave in Egypt." And with that once again the reminder that now you were not a slave because he had set you free.

God knew that commandments did not have the power to produce godly righteousness or fruit. The law does not have that power. So just having the law wasn't good enough. The people under that law needed power and a change in heart and attitude to do what it commanded. That power and change comes only from God's love—his love shown to his people in redeeming us from slavery in Egypt and most especially, his power and love shown to us in redeeming us from slavery to Satan, sin and death. "You remember that, you trust my love for you," God says, "and then you will have the power and love to obey what I command, namely that you love others, especially those in need."

And so it is up to each of you as individual members of God's church, individually loved by him, to make your donations of food, money, clothes, and whatever else to those in need, whether you do that directly or whether you choose to do that through a reputable agency. But please, understand, as it was for the Israel of the OT so it is for the Israel of the NT. The offerings you bring to God's house support his spiritual work; they are not used to cover your charity to those in need. Those are two different things. God's mercy on you compels you to provide for both. God's generous love has provided you with the means to support both. Should you struggle in this, remember who you were and remember what great things God has done for you, then love as you have been and are loved by him.

It was God's people responding to his love who assisted in providing us with a Savior. It is still God's people responding to his love who assist in providing people with the news of a Savior. That is the story of Ruth. That is your story. WE LOVE, BECAUSE HE LOVES. In his love we have peace, and the peace of God which goes beyond all understanding will guard and keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.