

Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church
Brillion, WI

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
July 10 and 14, 2013

Deuteronomy 24:17-22

What do you think is Broadway's longest running show? It's a show so popular that it's been going great guns for over 25 years now. I'll give you a hint. It's not *Cats*. Overseas it has played to over 150 million people in 29 countries in over 150 cities in thirteen languages. Over 65,000 performances are now in the books. Have you figured it out yet? It's Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Phantom of the Opera*.

Phantom's success is not hard to understand. It has some of the most hauntingly beautiful music you'll ever hear, memorable characters, and a moving plot. By far the most sympathetic character in the story is the phantom. When you watch the show, you bleed for this man who is so alone, so afraid, so filled with shame and pain because of his misshapen face. He thinks he has to stay in the shadows so no one is forced to look at him. That's why he's called the phantom.

Phantom strikes a chord with everyone who watches it for a couple of reasons. #1 it plays out on stage one of our greatest fears. What if everyone around me thinks I'm a monster and wants nothing to do with me? And #2 at some gut level we believe the story. We think, "That could actually happen." And that's why Deuteronomy chapter 24 hits us like a cool wind on a hot July day. It is a delight and a comfort to know that the Lord, the God of this universe, has a huge, incredible heart for the vulnerable of this planet - one that he plants in his holy people.

Listen to what God commands about the vulnerable:

Do not deprive the alien or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge. 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. When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the alien, the fatherless and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow. When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this.

When someone comes to you and says, "I want to start reading my Bible. Where should I start?" No one says, "Try Deuteronomy." We don't believe we have a flat Bible. And, yet, Deuteronomy is a striking gem in many ways. Buried in a section labeled *Miscellaneous Laws* is a message revealing the heartbeat of God. Go back to the initial command of the section and you'll see what's on God's heart. God has it on his heart to make sure that the alien, the fatherless, and the widow have justice.

Four times in six verses the same people are listed. They start the section. They end the section. Let me say that again to impress the point. Four times in six verses the same people are listed. What is that telling you? That God thinks we're not very smart so he needs to repeat himself? No. That's not it. It's telling us that God - and this is an understatement - is very, very concerned about the alien, the fatherless, and the widow. Why these people?

I know that you know that the Bible isn't talking about extraterrestrial beings with green faces and big eyes when it mentions aliens. It's talking about people who are coming from another country to yours. Today we'd probably call them immigrants. No immigrant goes to another country because things are "oh so great back" home. If you go to Ellis Island and you read the displays you find out that German people came to America saying, "We have religious problems back home," and Irish people came saying, "I'm not sure what I'm going to eat tomorrow," because the potato crop failed. It was the same in Bible times. You only leave your home - It is your home! You don't want to leave! - because of war, famine, epidemic or some other awful thing that forces you to leave. Do you see what that makes immigrants? It makes them vulnerable.

Next in the list is the fatherless. Now think like an ancient person. If you don't have a dad, you don't have a house and you don't have any food. Worse yet, you don't have any way of getting those things. It wasn't like today where in 40% of households women are the main breadwinners and single moms manage to be champions for their kids. If you didn't have a dad bringing home the bacon, you were in big trouble. There weren't foster homes. That weren't food stamps. There wasn't Badgercare. There was no social safety net for kids without dads. That made the fatherless vulnerable.

And then there were the widows. Widows weren't any better off than fatherless kids except for that fact that they were adults. Their only easy opportunities for paying jobs involved things we can't talk about in front of the kids. Social safety nets like Social Security didn't exist. And so God talks about these people four times in six verses: the alien, the fatherless, and the widow. We're going to call them the vulnerable three.

And this is what he says about them, "**Do not deprive the alien or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge. (v. 17)**" Notice how God frames this issue. This isn't God saying, "Ya know, if you feel up to it and you have enough, feel free to contribute to the cause." He's not making this an optional. In fact, God frames this as an issue of justice. It is right - it is just - to take care of the vulnerable. The flipside is also true. It is wrong - it is unjust of you - not to take care of the vulnerable. And just so we're clear here. God doesn't pawn this off and say, "It's really the government's job to do this." The responsibility for the vulnerable is put squarely on our shoulders.

How that feels depends on the situation. There are two poles I've noticed we can swing towards depending on the circumstances. The first pole I'm going to call the "selfish" pole. If I'm near the selfish pole and I see a vulnerable person I'm going to say, "That would be nice to help, but I need to take care of my family. Somebody with more money will." Then the next Friday night I'm out for fish with friends while someone in the world is wondering where his or her next meal will come from. If I'm not near that pole I'm swinging towards a pole I'm going to call the "scornful" pole. If I'm near the scornful pole, then I see someone under a bridge and I say, "I really can't give to this person. It might encourage their bad behavior. It's probably his fault he's in this pickle anyway!"

I think it's painfully obvious that God isn't saying to us today, "It's ok to think that way." It's not. It's sinful. God says something strikingly different. In fact, you can say truthfully that God has the best social conscience of all! He tells people gathering in the harvest, "When you're taking in the grains, don't go back and get the stuff you missed. That way the vulnerable three have something to eat and to sell." He tells people harvesting olives, "Go ahead and beat the olives of the branches once, but don't do it twice. Leave some on the branches for the vulnerable three to pick through." He tells people who are picking grapes, "Don't go over the clusters with a fine tooth comb. Leave some behind." And again notice what God doesn't say here. He doesn't say, "Don't leave too much behind now. You might encourage bad behavior," or, "Be careful. You might not have enough for yourself." God just tells us to take care of the vulnerable and leave the rest to him. That's a God with an incredibly powerful social conscience. Don't you think?

God is also real about something. He knows we're drawn towards the two poles like magnets and so he unleashes the power of remembering on us: **"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. (v. 18)"** Take a walk down memory lane ancient Israelite style. Remember. Remember sitting around the campfire with grandpa and hear him tell the story, "Yeah, it was awful down there in Egypt." Then he gets real quiet and says, "You have an uncle you never got to meet. They killed him. He was just a baby." His voice steadies and with a distant look in his eye says, "They worked us till we were nothing but skin and bones. I remember one day when I went down because of heat exhaustion. I couldn't move. The slave master took his whip out." Grandpa grows quiet again and then suddenly there's a bright intensity and he says, "And then the plagues came! God brought us out of Egypt. He redeemed us!"

Think about that. Those were people who had the same draw toward the wrong poles like we do. Yet, God didn't write them off when they were vulnerable. He did anything but. He redeemed them. He literally buried Pharaoh, their captor, and busted off their shackles. The Lord is a redeemer. For all. And for you! Redemption is what he does. He does not hold it against you that you stood at the "scornful" pole or held onto the "selfish" pole for dear life. God held that against Jesus. The Lord is a God of redemption. It's what he does. Remember that.

And then keep remember God's additional mercies when you were vulnerable in other ways. I know a guy who was very vulnerable not so long ago. So vulnerable that for the first four years of his family's life he couldn't afford any health insurance. I know a guy who had scholarship money show up when he needed it the most. I know a guy who visited a food pantry to make it through the month and did this regularly for a period of over a couple of years. I can promise you it wasn't because he didn't have three jobs at one time. I know a guy who had thousands and thousands and thousands of dollars of student loans come due all at once. I know a guy like that. I know a guy who counted pennies to make bills. And because of that, that guy got to know a God who protects and provides for very vulnerable people like him.

I'll bet you might know someone like that too. I'll bet it's you. Unleash the power of remembering the Lord's grace to your vulnerability and that's when the magic happens. Now all of a sudden we're not wondering anymore, "Will this impoverish me?" Or, "Will I be taken advantage of?" Now we're wondering, "Where is there a need that I can help meet? The Lord brought me out of my Egypt. I'm moved to do the same for others." And then we can get right to it!

I know a really great Christian man. Every month he sends a small amount of money (It's not that expensive to do!) through a reputable agency to feed a boy in an orphanage in India (one of the vulnerable three!). The family calls this young Indian their adopted brother. The kids pray for their adopted brother and they send letters back and forth. I know other wonderful Christian people have been moved to help the vulnerable right here in Brillion. People who work at Hidden Treasures. People who donate to Scrip it Forward or deliver for Soup 4 Souls. People who give to our school's tuition fund. Just to name a few.

And that brings us full circle. Remembering God's redemption, his grace in our personal history, shows us that we aren't nameless, faceless phantoms. Anything but. We know that we're personally loved and cared for in Jesus Christ. Take a stroll down memory lane and see if that's not true! That unleashes us and moves us to do the same for others. It doesn't matter to us why someone is vulnerable - maybe they don't have a dad, maybe they lost their husband, or maybe they have a face nobody can look at - that's not what's important to us. What matters is that somebody else is vulnerable - there is a need to be met! - and by God's grace we'll be there to meet it. Amen.