

In Covenant

sermon digest

January 19, 2011

Deuteronomy 15:4-5, 7-8, 10-11; 24:14-15, 17-22

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It is called the “second law.” It seems to have first circulated around the year 621 B.C.E. and was probably the newly discovered “book of law” leading to sweeping religious reform during the reign of Josiah. It is presented as Moses’ farewell address to the people as they stand poised to enter the land of Canaan without him. As such, it calls each and every one of them to live out of the enabling remembrance of the faithful and mighty acts of the God who has brought them out of slavery and through the wilderness. It is a heartfelt rehearsal of the covenant that binds every one of them to God and one another. The final book of the Torah, it is far from the dry and life-sapping legalism that we have too often attributed to Israel’s law. From beginning to end it is about what it means to love God with all of one’s heart, soul and strength. From beginning to end it is about life. It is a reminder about the way to abundant and hopeful living. It is a word shared “that you may live.”

Covenant is rooted in abundance. Life in Palestine was anything but easy. The reality of taxes, war, crop failure and debt dogged the lives of the Hebrew people. Yet, the teachings of Hebrew scripture point to anything but a hand to mouth existence, for at bottom reality was grounded in the God of creation and sabbath. Two words for God’s creative acts are used in the creation stories. One, the word translated “make,” is used for the actions of God and later for the actions of people as well. The other, the word translated “create,” is used in the Bible solely for the actions of God. Signifying “fat” or “fatness” it spoke to the teeming abundance, the plentiful nature of creation. Looking back over the work of creation and pronouncing it good, really good, God took a sabbath. God ceased work and rested—again, an indication of the complete adequacy of creation—an indication, as Robert Lowery delightfully puts it, of God’s “cosmic wow!” Elsewhere in the Bible, Lowery goes on to note, rest signifies political security, the establishment of justice and peace [in “Sabbath,” *Christian Reflection*, Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor, 2002]. Centered as it was in the celebration of sabbath, the entirety of Israel’s life, then, was to take its cue from this confidence in the God of creation whose gracious provision undergirded every aspect of life.

Covenant is about community. Covenant is not about living unto myself or for myself. It is about living in constant awareness of others, particularly those who are most vulnerable. On the sabbath, Deuteronomy insists, “you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you” (5:14). Sabbath speaks of ceasing from feverish activity. It speaks of grace and extending that grace to those who surround us. For the Hebrew it meant laying down the tools of trade. It meant resting the soil, resting farm animals. It meant extending rest to resident aliens and slaves.

We do not live to ourselves. We do not even live in an isolated, cozy relationship with God. In the light of God’s sovereign grace, we live in relationship with one another. Again and again, Deuteronomy’s teachings counsel justice and care for those in need; and more than mild generalizations about kindness, it’s instructions get quite specific. If a neighbor’s animal gets loose, “you may not hide yourself” and pretend not to notice. You shall return it safely to its owner, even if the owner is your enemy. If you come across a bird’s nest, you may eat the eggs or the young, but you may not eat the mother. She must be left to bear more young “that it may go well with you and you may live long.” When you are treading out grain with your ox, you must not muzzle him, but allow him eat. When you build a roof, you should surround it with a protective wall so that no one is injured by falling to the ground.

Life, the deuteronomist tells us, is to be lived with an eye to the need and protection of others. “You may not hide yourself,” he insists, from the suffering and pain of others. Loans, wages and the harvesting of the land must all be practiced under the watchful eye of God. Going in the short space of five verses in chapter fifteen from “there will be no one in need among you” to “if there is among you anyone in need” to “since there will never cease to be some in need,” the deuteronomist warns against being “hard-hearted” and “tight-fisted”. “Give liberally and be ungrudging.” “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.” Those in need, those whom you hold in your debt, he says repeatedly, are none other than your “brothers” [and sisters]; and when someone is your neighbor,

your brother or sister, money matters become secondary to the primary importance of the person. Therefore, when you make a loan, do so with an eye to protecting the dignity and the future of the person who stands before you. Do not shortchange the poor and needy workers in your midst their fair and timely wages, for if you were to do so and they cried out to God, “you would incur guilt.” When you harvest your field, your olives, your grapes, leave some for the poor to glean that they may eat and live.

Covenantal living is a matter of justice and mercy. Deuteronomy’s counsel is timely for a moment in which we are plagued by the dual threats of terrorism and economic instability. Much on the order of twenty years ago when political strategist James Carville crafted Bill Clinton’s presidential campaign to the tune of the unrelenting drumbeat: “It’s the economy, stupid,” polls indicated last fall that the economic crisis was the number one concern of voters headed to the polls. Although we tend to look elsewhere in formulating our economic theory, the Bible is unrelenting in its insistence that economic issues are essentially related to the worship and service of God. But what we see there is more than an injunction to charity. Very specific instructions concerning fair pay, humane working conditions, honest trading practices and treatment of debtors abound. Economic behavior, as all behavior, is dominated by the concept of covenant—our responsibility to God and one another.

We live, Walter Brueggemann suggests, in a society that bids us to a lifestyle on a completely different order—a lifestyle dominated by autonomy rather than mutuality, rugged individualism rather than community. As such, we are continually tempted into “an endless rat race of achievement that produces bottomless anxiety—about the market, about performance, about self-worth” [*Sojourners Magazine*, Feb. 2005]. Rather than living out of a sense of abundance rooted in the graciousness of God, we find ourselves lured into a sense of fear where we see others as competitors, a threat to our security rather than as brothers and sisters. The God of covenant calls us even in the midst of threat and perhaps most insistently in the midst of threat to build together a covenant community that lives out of the abundance of grace. It is an invitation to know our lives shaped by the abundance of the “milk and honey” rather than anxiety and greed.

The front of your order of service this morning depicts a child obviously in desperate need. There are those who will tell you that you will find peace only by averting your eyes. In the tradition of the deuteronomist who insists that if you are faithful to the God of covenant, “you may not hide yourself,” I say open your eyes and see. May that child and his need and every other child and every human need weigh upon us. In this time of economic anxiety, may we have eyes to see and ears to hear every injustice, every people in need until our worship overflows in liberating charity and an unrelenting demand for justice in the land.