First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

9/3/23

A Matter of Justice

Deuteronomy 15:7-11

7 If 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. 8 You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. 9 Be 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. 10 Give 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. 11 Since 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.”

At the last meeting of the Music and Worship committee we were looking at the calendar and, realizing that this Sunday was the day before Labor Day, the committee challenged me to preach a sermon that would be relevant to the holiday. This piqued my interest, because I wanted to see how I could connect this very secular holiday with scripture. So, I’m grateful to the committee for stretching me, a bit, and we’ll see if I’ve been successful in connecting the dots.

Now, if you Google “Scriptures about Labor Day,” what comes up are a variety of passages such as Colossians 3:23, which reads, ***“****Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters,”* or 1 Corinthians 10:31,***“****So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.”* And then there’s this one from Ecclesiastes 5:18-20, 18 *This is what I have observed to be good: that it is appropriate for a person to eat, to drink and to find satisfaction in their toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given them—for this is their lot. 19 Moreover, when God gives someone wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil—this is a gift of God. 20 They seldom reflect on the days of their life, because God keeps them occupied with gladness of heart.*

For the most part, I don’t find myself disagreeing with the message any of these passages offer. The exception, however, is the way verse 19 of the Ecclesiastes passage has often been interpreted as justification to keep poor people poor and in their place. Be happy with what little you’ve been given; be happy that some are given wealth and possessions; be happy and just accept your lot in life.

As I’ve said many times before, there is nothing wrong with having wealth and possessions. Where things go sideways, in my view, is when that wealth and those possessions are hoarded and even a portion of that bounty is not used to help those in need. And this brings us to the Deuteronomy passage I picked as the basis for today’s sermon.

There’s one thing that stands out in this passage and that’s the first part of verse 9 where we read, *“Be 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…”* The year of remission was a practice where every seventh year, the Israelites were commanded to forgive all debts owed to them by other Israelites. It was intended to prevent people from falling into poverty and had been instituted by Moses himself as a way to reinforce God’s commandment to care for those who struggled, or were unable, to care for themselves. The practice of forgiving debt every seventh year faded out over time, unfortunately, and I wonder what type of world would we live in if that practice continued today.

So, how can we relate the Deuteronomy passage to our lives today, especially on a day when we celebrate the workers and laborers among us?

When I was prepping this sermon, I came across some information regarding the eight-hour work day, which I found fascinating, and somewhat horrifying, at the same time. All of us have benefitted from the eight-hour workday and, in fact, it’s something that in 2023, we simply take for granted. The idea of an eight-hour work day has been around for centuries, but it was first articulated in the US in 1866. However, Congress didn’t pass a law mandating an eight-hour work day until 1916, fifty years later. Even after Congress passed the law, there was a court challenge and it wasn’t until 1917 that the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the legislation.

I mention this because until this law was upheld by the Supreme Court, wealthy industrialists were free to exploit workers anyway they saw fit. And while today’s passage was written for a different time and was intended for a different people, it could have just as easily been written, and intended, for those who ran mines, mills and factories. I wonder how the Rockefellers, the DuPonts, and the Fords must have felt sitting in church and hearing this passage preached.

One of the things that I’ve noticed over my career, is a tendency for some Christians to cherry pick many of the commandments found in the Old Testament. On the one hand, the thinking goes, since Jesus established a new covenant, many of the laws found in the Torah no longer apply. This certainly holds true with regard to laws about diet and what we can and cannot wear. On the other hand, many of these same people will use rules found in the Old Testament to justify their hatred and bigotry, when it becomes convenient to do so. And caring for the poor and needy is often the first casualty of such cherry picking.

Our reading today isn’t just a relic from a bygone age. It’s not something we can gloss over on our way to passages that we might like better. It’s not something we can ignore, just because it was originally intended for the Children of Israel. And I would argue that the Deuteronomy passage compliments James 2:14-17, where we read, “What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also, faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”

On this Labor Day weekend, in addition to the barbeques, and the picnics, I believe we should celebrate and honor all those whose work makes our lives easier or more convenient. I also believe we should celebrate and honor the men and women who fought for fair pay, who fought for better working conditions, and who fought, and continue to fight, for all the other things we are able to take for granted when it comes to work. I believe it because whether they knew it or not, whether they *know* it or not, these people are following God’s commandment set out in today’s reading.

We are told that there will always be folks with us who are poor and needy. And, if I’m honest, that knowledge can lead to a sense of apathy. If the poor and needy are always with us, what difference will be made by donating a couple of boxes of Mac and Cheese to the Food bank? What impact is fighting for a living wage going to have, when we’re going up against multi-national corporations? I’m just one person, what difference can one person make?

Ultimately, I believe that one person CAN make a difference. Those boxes of Mac and Cheese? They might be enough to feed a hungry family. Fighting for a living wage? One person committed to the cause of a living wage can be the spark that ignites an entire movement.

So, it comes down to this: Will we be hard hearted and tightfisted with our needy neighbors? Our neighbors who work two and three jobs just to pay the rent? Our neighbors who go hungry because of the high price of food? Our neighbors who can’t afford healthcare? Or, are we going to follow God’s command to "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land,” and do our part to help bend the arc of the moral universe towards justice? AMEN