

Planting Hope: In Our Backyard Deuteronomy 24:19-22

Jeff Marian

You may have heard of the church being referred to as “the parish,” especially among our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers. But you may not know what the term means or where it comes from. The word “parish” comes from two ancient Greek words: “para” meaning beside or near and “oikos” meaning house. A parish is literally the territory surrounding God’s house, the church. Way back in the day before there were 6,000 denominations, a single church would bear responsibility for the people of the surrounding territory. It was their “parish” to serve. It’s a pretty cool concept when you think about it, the notion of stewarding, serving, and nurturing whoever happens to be in your sphere of influence.

And this whole notion of the faith community taking care of the people in a geographical area is rooted in the Old Testament law found in Deuteronomy, which most biblical scholars believe dates back to the 7th century B.C. Today’s scripture reading from Deuteronomy 24:19-22 gives us a glimpse of that concept. Let’s read it together,

¹⁹ “When you are harvesting your crops and forget to bring in a bundle of grain from your field, don’t go back to get it. Leave it for the foreigners, orphans, and widows. Then the LORD your God will bless you in all you do. ²⁰ When you beat the olives from your olive trees, don’t go over the boughs twice. Leave the remaining olives for the foreigners, orphans, and widows. ²¹ When you gather the grapes in your vineyard, don’t glean the vines after they are picked. Leave the remaining grapes for the foreigners, orphans, and widows. ²² Remember that you were slaves in the land of Egypt. That is why I am giving you this command.

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

In 21st century America if you fall on hard times, there are a multitude of resources to fall back on: The Red

Cross, the Salvation Army, Lutheran Social Services, local food pantries, and the list goes on and on. But if you fell on hard times back in the 7th century B.C., you walked a thin line between survival and death. And if you were a foreigner, an orphan or a widow...by far the most vulnerable people in ancient society...your chances of survival were especially slim.

But God, who cares about the well-being of all people, commanded the Israelites to leave enough unharvested grapes in their vineyards, olives in their groves, and grain in their fields, so that the hungry could glean enough to survive. Any orphan, widow or foreigner in that parish would be cared for. That, my friends, is an ancient social security system, and it’s a reflection of God’s heart for all people in need.

One of the things that I most love about this community of faith, Prince of Peace, is that we are people who reflect that heart of God to our “parish,” to people in need within our sphere of influence. And while we do that in many ways, our Mission Outpost is perhaps the clearest and certainly the most visible way in which we care for people’s physical and spiritual needs. In the ancient world those in need would have to walk through fields and groves and glean what had been left over after the harvest. Today, we glean unpurchased food from local markets, keep it out of landfill, and make it available to those in need. We glean unwanted clothing from the closets and drawers of people and make it available to children in need of school clothes or someone who needs to dress up for a job interview. We glean the unused hours of generous dentists and dental hygienists to care for the dental needs of those who can’t afford it. We glean all sorts of resources that are available but perhaps unknown and make sure that those in need can access them. And all the while we aren’t just caring for people’s physical needs, we are addressing their spiritual needs through prayer, a hug and a word of hope and encouragement. That’s how we care for our parish.

What happens through our Mission Outpost is nothing short of amazing, and that kind of amazing ministry deserves amazing space in which to work and welcome our guests. And that is exactly what our collective generosity is making possible. And next week, we’re going to celebrate the Grand Opening of our Mission Outpost and Child Care space. Finally and fully realizing our dream of bringing all ministries under one roof.

It's exciting, isn't it? That's how we care for our parish. That's how we reflect God's heart to our community. But what if it didn't stop there? What if we took this parish concept a bit further, a bit more personally? What if each one of us considered our neighborhood, our classroom, our office, our department, our floor of the senior center in which we live...what if we considered that our personal parish? We could think about it this way – Scripture says that each one of us "houses" the Holy Spirit. We are, each of us and all of us together, literally God's house. So, whoever surrounds us is our parish.

As Jesus calls each of us to be witnesses to his love in our own "Jerusalem," our own neighborhoods, schools, and places of work, what might that look like? How can we have an impact? The answer is limited only by the needs around us and the creativity within us. But here's an example just to inspire you. Watch this:

Video - Michigan neighbors build memories at ice rink:
<https://www.youtube.com/>

One person can make a real difference, and that one person can be you, when you respond to the Holy Spirit's call and the Spirit's work through you.

So, here are three questions for you to think about, to pray about, and to talk about with a friend or family member.

1. What's your parish? What territory is God calling you to take some responsibility for? Maybe it's your classroom or a student. Maybe it's the people on your block? Maybe it's the people living in the apartments around you. What is your parish?
2. What are the needs in your parish? Those needs may be obvious, and if they aren't you may need to get to know your parish a bit better. Take a walk around with fresh eyes. Have a few conversations. It won't take long before those needs to come to the surface.
3. Finally, how is the Spirit calling you to respond to those needs? Don't focus on what you can't do; focus on what you can. How can you steward the resources that God has placed in your care to reflect God's heart to others?

Those are some powerful questions to pray about, reflect on and discuss. Martin Luther once said, "God doesn't need our good works. But our neighbor does." That's so true! Can you imagine how different our communities would be if every person who houses the Holy Spirit – and that's all of us – responded to God's

call to care for their parish? That would be amazing and life changing. That would expand our idea of "church" well beyond the boundaries of this campus. And I think that is exactly what Jesus had in mind when he said, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem."

Let's pray...