

“Reflecting on privilege in crisis”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*Deuteronomy 24:10-21*

By Shavonn Lynch

Privilege. Privilege is defined as a special right, advantage, or immunity granted or available only to a particular person or group. To be privileged is to have an advantage over another. But what does privilege look like? Would you look at me and say surely, she is privileged? Perhaps. If you looked in the mirror right now would say that the person looking back at you is privileged? The answer to the question “what does privilege look like” is going to be different for everyone. For some, the answer may be clear and without question, for others the answer may be messy and complicated.

Someone shared a meme with me that showed two people side by side, one a white businessman wearing a suit with a clear path to the finish line, the other a woman of color with all manner of obstacles in her path forward. The caption on the meme reads (What’s the matter, it’s the same distance?) Now, as an African American woman, I can easily put my name in the meme, and it would read (What’s the matter, Shavonn, it’s the same distance?) Despite the obstacles I face as an African American woman and as a woman does that mean that I cannot come from a place of privilege?

The book of Deuteronomy is a book of remembrance. The chosen people of God are called to remember their long history and covenantal relationship with the God of their deliverance. Their history is that of a people who endured hardship and oppression as enslaved people in a land that is hostile to their existence, released by the mighty hand of God. As people of the covenant, the Israelites have been given the law so that they may live as a people who have set apart for God’s purpose. But the law was not merely a set of rules and regulations; the law was given to remind the people to how to live as one people, one community, loving God and caring for the neighbor.

In our scripture reading for today, we hear a succession of “you shall nots.” You shall not publicly dishonor your neighbor by seizing the collateral owed to you for a loan. You shall not withhold the only garment they may own to keep them warm at night. You must return it so they may have covering for the night. You shall not withhold payment for work done leaving those in need without means of securing food or provisions. Hold each one accountable for their actions, parent, and child alike. You shall not deny justice to the stranger or the orphan nor shall you leave the widow destitute. Remember that you were once marginalized and oppressed people in a foreign land; until the hand of God brought you out. Now, in hearing all that we shall not do we may find the law to become burdensome. If we become bogged down by the weightiness of the law, it will become too heavy to bear. Instead let us allow the law to transform our thinking, let us allow it to shape the way we see other, so that we may see the humanity in those we encounter.

When you are gathering wheat from the field and forget a bundle, do not retrieve it; it shall be left for the least among you, the stranger, the orphan, the widow. When you shake loose the fruit from your olive trees, do not shake them bare; leave fruit on the branch so that the underprivileged may have fruit for the picking. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not pick them bare; remember those less fortunate than you, the stranger, the orphan and the widow

We may not gather wheat at harvest time; we may not harvest the fruit of olive trees or gather grapes from the vineyard. No, these tasks do not fit our lives today, but what if I said to you: when you stock up on essential items; do not strip the shelves bare, remember the elder couple or the single parent who must wait for their benefits before they can shop for food and provisions; when you open your full cupboards and complain there is nothing good to eat; remember the people who are flocking to the soup kitchens and food pantry in hopes satisfying their hunger, at least for today; when you feel that you cannot bear to be confined the four walls of your home; remember there are some who have no walls to confine them, and others who are confined to spaces that are overcrowded, unsafe, and unsanitary.

Am I privileged? Yes. Although I struggle with being alone during this time of social distancing and isolation and yes, it is a struggle, even for someone as introverted as I, I am safe and secure in the confines of my home. I have food enough to eat, even if it is not what I want. I have the privilege of staying home, while so many others must work putting themselves in harm's way. There are members of my family who are afraid to hug their own children because of the work that they do. I have an even greater privilege, I have the privilege of completing a master's program from the confines of my home. There are parents, and grandparents, aunts and uncles who are struggling to educate their children without the basic necessities.

When we focus on the shall nots and the restrictions of the law, the law becomes burdensome. It becomes too heavy a burden for us to carry. The law could not save the people of Israel from themselves. Laws will not save us from ourselves. We see that by the actions of some who see the law as infringing on their rights to gather in large numbers, to get a hair cut or go to the movies. The law given to the people of Israel was given to shape them into God's people, loving God and caring for their neighbor. The laws of social distancing and social isolation were designed to save us from ourselves and each other. Laws cannot make us see the humanity of others we encounter. They cannot make us care for the orphan, the widow, stranger, the elderly couple, the retail worker, or the nurse. They cannot make us care for our neighbor.

According to Matthew 5:17 Jesus Christ did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. Jesus Christ is the embodiment of the law. Throughout his life and ministry, he modeled what care for our neighbor is supposed to look like. On his journey to the cross, he saw in the faces of the people he encountered, the rich and the poor, the young and the old, the stranger and the friend, his reason for being. Jesus Christ sacrificed himself on the cross, to save us, to redeem us, to reconcile us, accomplish what the law could not through an act of sacrificial love. Caring for your neighbor is a privilege. It means that you can look at another and see their humanity, just as Jesus Christ was able to ours even while dying on the cross. Thanks be to God. **Amen.**