

Reverence for Life
Numbers 35:6-16, 22-34

“Jackson is the murder capital of the world, and that is not a title we should be proud of.” That’s what Governor Tate Reeves said recently, and his critics were quick to point out his error. After all, they say, Jackson’s murder rate of 88.8 per 100,000 residents in the year 2022 was much lower than that of two cities in Mexico: Tijuana at 138 or Acapulco at 110.5. Caracas, Venezuela comes in third at 99.98.

So, no, Jackson isn’t the murder capital of the world – it’s only the fourth highest on the worldwide list. But it is true that for two years in a row, out of all the cities in the United States having more than 130,000 residents, Jackson has had the most murders per capita. That means that statistically speaking, Jackson is more dangerous than New Orleans or New York or Detroit. Believe it or not, Jackson’s per capita murder rate is actually three times higher than Chicago’s. So, while the Governor may not have been technically correct, I think we can all share his shock and outrage, even if we might disagree with any particular proposals that might have been made to solve the problem.

And in today’s passage, we see that God is just as disgusted with all this bloodshed. Of course we know that He prohibited it in the sixth of His Ten Commandments. And at the end of today’s passage, He goes so far as to say that blood defiles or pollutes the land on which it is shed. God even says that if His people wanted Him to dwell with them, it was critical that they do everything possible to prevent such bloodshed. So it just makes sense that administering the death penalty for those who commit murder was one way for God’s people to deter such horrible behavior.

And we might be willing to stop here, sharing the outrage of our Governor and our God, and wishing that District Attorneys and judges would get tougher on those who have made our state’s capital city such a national, and even world-wide disgrace. Or, as was common practice in the Ancient Near East, we might want to take matters into our own hands, seeking vengeance on those who would dare to commit murder in our midst. That’s what the “revenger of blood” mentioned throughout this passage was trying to do – upholding the honor of his clan or tribe by killing anyone who would dare to kill one of his kinsmen. And we have to admit that such vigilante justice was quite commonplace in Mississippi not too long ago: between 1882 and 1968, some 581 people were lynched in this state.

But today’s passage should serve as a helpful check on such passions. For even though God obviously thinks that murder is a terrible crime, He also insisted that the Israelites set up six cities of refuge so those who were accused of murder could avail themselves of the sort of justice that we Americans have come to take for granted: a public trial in which witnesses are called upon to confirm the guilt of the defendant. In fact, verse 30 makes it clear that God required more than one witness to convict anyone of murder, in spite of how heinous He obviously considers such a crime to be.

Yes, all of us Mississippians in particular and Americans in general can take great pride in the fact that our justice system aligns so closely with the Word of God, at least at this point: we carefully balance the rights of the accused against the need to administer severe punishment to those who commit murder. And given the fact that the Christian faith has historically been a big influence on those who have crafted our laws, this should come as no surprise.

But regardless of how Biblical our laws may be, Jackson continues to be the murder capital of the United States. So instead of smugly congratulating ourselves on our constitutional system, maybe we need to take a closer look at today’s passage. Maybe it will help us understand how all our cities and small towns can become safer, more godly places.

And that's perhaps the most important thing we need to notice: all of us have to be involved in the answer to our murder problem, in one way or another. Now, it's obvious that in Old Testament times the Levites were supposed to take a large role in the judicial system, since every one of the cities of refuge was to be populated almost exclusively by members of their tribe. So, when members of the other tribes of Israel fled to these cities after being accused of murder, they could expect to receive impartial treatment from the Levites.

Moreover, since the Levites were the caretakers of the Tabernacle, they were supposed to know a lot about God's Word and God's will. In fact, Moses made it clear that the Levites were supposed to teach the rest of the people about God's Law (Deuteronomy 24:8), and that they were to act as judges to help the people settle their disputes (Deuteronomy 21:5).

And it is still the case that we need impartial experts like attorneys and judges to help victims and defendants understand their rights, and to help juries understand their responsibility to determine the facts of each case. As my lawyer brother is fond of saying, "Your Google search does not trump my law degree."

But it is also the case that attorneys and judges cannot do their jobs without the participation of jurors and witnesses. Just so, however important it was for the Levites to manage and inform the judicial proceedings of ancient Israel, verse 24 makes clear that it was the congregation of God's people that was to decide who was right: either the manslayer who protested his innocence or the blood avenger who was accusing him of murder. And without two or more witnesses to confirm the blood avenger's accusations, the manslayer could not be convicted (verse 30).

So at the very least, this passage should remind us American Christians that justice is not something "they" do: it's something that "we" do. It's not just the responsibility of police chiefs and sheriffs, of judges and district attorneys: we all have to get involved. For let's face it: a big part of the reason that so many parts of our largest cities have become so dangerous is because the people who live there have become hesitant to come forward and tell the police and the prosecutors what they know about the crimes committed in their midst. Without willing and reliable witnesses willing to testify against them, it's no wonder that so many criminals go free.

Moreover, should we expect our courts to hand down just decisions when so many men and women of sound judgment and good will take every possible opportunity to avoid serving on our juries? No, if we are not all involved in the judicial process that seeks to enforce our laws, if we are not actively exercising the responsibilities that go along with self-government, we should not be surprised when lawbreakers are emboldened – and even when blood runs in the streets of our capital city.

And if justice is something that we all must participate in, it's also something that everyone deserves. Notice that verse 15 specifically says that the stranger and the sojourner had an equal right to the protection that the cities of refuge provided. And remember: since strangers or aliens by definition didn't belong to God's covenant people, they were most likely worshippers of false gods. It would therefore not be unreasonable for God's people to consider them unclean at best, and wicked at worst.

In the same way, it would have been easy for God's people to look down on sojourners. For although they may have moved into the land of Israel, and thus were obligated to obey its laws, they were not members of any of the twelve tribes. They could not therefore own land, and were naturally dependent on God's people for jobs. They were among the poorest of the poor.

But regardless of anyone's ethnic group or class or creed, regardless of whether they were virtuous or what we might consider to be sorry or trashy or no-account, God said that everyone was to receive the same sort of judicial protections God's people enjoyed.

So, Americans, how are we doing with that? Sure, our statutes say that everyone is equal in the eyes of the law, but it's not just the "Black Lives Matter" crowd that has come to wonder whether that's true. For haven't we all been rightfully incensed about wealthy, powerful people who seem to get away with all sorts of crimes while ordinary folks like us can't catch a break?

And even if folks came into our country illegally, do they deserve to have criminal gangs preying on them? And what about the young women who are trafficked for sex, and who, because of their legal status, are just as afraid of the police as they are of their pimps? And what about all the children who have to grow up in neighborhoods where the police don't even bother to show up anymore because their parents' generation no longer has any faith in the judicial system? Do any of these powerless people really have access to our judicial system in the same way that we do? Do our aliens and sojourners really have cities of refuge today?

Now, I'm not pretending that there are easy answers to the problems in increasingly lawless places like some areas of our capital city. And quite frankly, many of the policies that have been suggested will probably do more harm than good. But if God cares about sorry, trashy, no-accounts like many of the Old Testament aliens and sojourners probably were, if God cares enough to make sure that everyone was treated fairly by His people's system of justice, well, we need to share His priorities, don't we?

For we cannot escape this fact: God cares enough about all human life to prescribe severe consequences even for those who cause accidental death. Take for example the situation described in verse 23: someone who dropped a large stone without seeing an innocent person standing underneath it. Verse 22 makes it clear that this was not premeditated, and not at all prompted by any kind of anger or enmity. It was just an accident, and that's what the trial determined.

But instead of letting such an accidental manslayer go free, God said that he had to stay in the city of refuge until the High Priest died. Now, this wasn't exactly house arrest, because the manslayer was allowed the run of the town. But he still wasn't allowed to go back to his own home and live among his own kinsmen. More importantly, he couldn't go back to his own fields or pastures. No, he would have to work for someone else, and that would probably mean a big reduction in his income. Make no mistake, he may not have been put to death for murder, but he would still pay dearly for his carelessness.

Yes, if there's one conclusion we can draw from the whole of today's passage it is this: we are called to have great reverence for all human life. That's why God is so outraged at murder, but insists on protecting the rights of the accused at the same time. That's why God insists on justice for the poor and oppressed, but insists that even accidental taking of life is to be severely punished. It's because God made both the victim and the manslayer in His own image.

For isn't that what the very first page of the Bible makes clear? God made all of us, male and female, in His image, after His likeness. God thus intended all of us to manage the beautiful world He made, to reflect His own glory to the rest of His creation, and to be in eternal relationship with Him. And that's true of all kinds of people, even those we might think aren't really worth worrying very much about, even those who have to live in the parts of Jackson that we do our best to avoid.

So no, we may not be able to solve the murder problem in Jackson or Vicksburg or even Port Gibson. We may not be able to fix all the family problems and economic difficulties that lead to so many killings. But as we vote for public officials, and as we serve as witnesses and jurors, we can do the best we can to make sure that everyone has access to a judicial system that is both just and fair.

And as we try to protect everyone's rights, even those who might not share all of our beliefs and values, aren't we really just following the example of Jesus? For God didn't just create all kinds of people. No, Christ came to save all kinds of people. He loved even unworthy sinners like us enough to lay down His life for us. And He calls us to demonstrate the same kind of love, to have the same kind of reverence for all human life that He has. In fact, isn't this just another way that we can love our neighbors in the same way that He has loved us?