

“Remember”

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Sunday, March 15, 2026

Texts: Matthew 19: 13-15 and Deuteronomy 24: 17-22

“Always remember that you were slaves in the land of Egypt...” (Deuteronomy 24: 22)

We were? I don't remember. I don't remember being an immigrant, either, but someone in my family came here at some point in history. I'm not native, even though I was born here. I don't remember witnessing American slavery personally, but I do know that it happened. I don't remember ever being poor, but I do remember tough times in our family's finances—both growing up and as an adult. The point is that each of us has been vulnerable at some point in our lives. That may have been a long time ago, or it may be now, or both, or it may come and go. The Deuteronomy scripture simply asks us to remember. Remember that if your life is good, it hasn't always been that way for people just like you, or me. Our lack of memory is a part of the problem when it comes to caring for the most vulnerable in our society. Our scriptures are aimed at raising our communal and individual purity. It begins with recovering our memory.

Thank heavens the Deuteronomic prescription is balanced by the sweet story of Jesus and the children! Note the sarcasm. That is exactly what was not happening in the story from our Matthew scripture. Yes, it is true that Jesus welcomed the children into his presence, but most of us today fail to see the real message behind Jesus' welcoming. This is also a story about the vulnerable. Children were some of the most vulnerable in Jesus'

day. In a commentary on the passage, the authors of *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* share these facts:

Childhood in antiquity was difficult. Fifty percent of Children died before the age of five. They were the weakest members of society. They were fed last and received the smallest and least desirable portions of food. They were the first to suffer from famine, war, disease, and natural disasters. Many, some say more than 70 percent, would have lost one or both parents before reaching puberty. A minor had the same status as an enslaved person, and it was not until adulthood that they would be considered a free person. Calling an adult a child or “childish” was a great insult. This is not the final word, however. Children were, indeed, loved. A woman’s children would have been one of her closest emotional supports. Thus, to tell [Jesus’] disciples to become like children is to ask that they renounce their privileges as adult men and make themselves some of the most vulnerable people in society. Again, we’re confronted with the severe consequences of discipleship.

Perhaps we never knew, or perhaps we have forgotten the subversive nature of the Gospel. In our quest for greatness (whether we acknowledge it or not), we have forgotten some of the basic tenets of our faith—be it from the Old Testament or the New. We forget that the primary focus of our scripture is community. Each of us are called to what our Jewish brothers and sisters would call Mitsvah’s or Mitzvot. They are specific actions, practices, duties, and disciplines that make a Jewish person more faithful. They are part of our history, and part of our faith story as well – even though we often forget about the first half of our Bible. In the end, the scriptures remind us that we are obligated—all of us--to someone or something. The question is, to what or to whom? Scripture reminds us that we are to be obligated to God, and one way we show that is how we care for the vulnerable.

The Deuteronomy scripture is interesting because it seems to ask those who harvest to be forgetful. I suppose you could leave it at that, but what if someone chose to leave part of the harvest in the field for the immigrant, the orphaned, the widowed, the poor—for the

vulnerable? In practice that was the true goal. “It is an undergirding principle in the Torah [which we know as the first five books of our Old Testament] that every citizen shares in the responsibility of easing the life of the poor, and the abolition of poverty is considered the mark of an ideal society (Deuteronomy 15:4). God demands justice for the disadvantaged, who ground their claim in more than human charity (Leviticus 19:9f and 23:22) (*The Torah: A Modern Commentary*).”

Take a look around. Do we live in an ideal society? How would you rate our care of the vulnerable? Now, I know that means you’ve jumped to who to blame. It’s government. It’s that political party. It’s that politician. It’s that system or structure. You would be right on all counts. There are systems and structures that work against the needs of the vulnerable, and there are parties and politicians who seem to thrive on destroying those who are vulnerable. And yet, I think it’s important to consider our own treatment of the vulnerable. Remember, the directive in Deuteronomy (and in Matthew, really), was both communal and individual.

Consider our children. They are, in the words of Rev. Dr. Brian Blount, “the closest thing to a miracle in most of our modern human lives.” We love them dearly and want the best for them. How are things going for our kids? How are things for children around the world? How vulnerable would you say they are? Is there anything we can do about it?

In our story from Matthew’s gospel, the children “are a metaphor for all who lack societal status, who so-called decent folk find distasteful and undesirable. The migrant worker. The immigrant. The alien. The homeless. The powerless. The

undocumented...Jesus issues a clear, if not controversial, command for his followers. They are to live as an *ekklesia* a “church.” And this church is to exist in this world as a refuge of radical welcome.” I think you’ll agree that the state of children in the world (in the fullest definition of who “children” are) is abhorrent. All kinds of people around the world – especially the most vulnerable—are in desperate straits. I’m fairly sure I have you depressed, angry, or both in the state of the world’s children. I hope it doesn’t lead you to despair. For there is something we can do about it.

While we may not be able to change everything about the systems and structures of the world, we can have an influence in our own neighborhoods, our own community, and in our church. We can look out for who might be vulnerable among us (trust me, they are not hard to find...) and consider what we might be able to do about it. Maybe we don’t own a field where we can leave grain, or fruit, or olives, but maybe we do have other resources we can share. When we go to eat somewhere, we might realize that the server and staff who wait on us are often among the vulnerable and tip accordingly. When we encounter someone vulnerable in our own setting, we might find ways to help, rather than ways to bring them down further. Prayer can be a powerful resource if we remember that prayer often has as much to do with listening for God’s voice as it does with our praying for what we want or need. We can seek new ways to share—like we talked about last week. We can lobby for change at the local, state, and federal level. We can consider our own attitudes about the vulnerable and figure out where our biases lay, and how we might seek to change our own hearts and minds. We can check our assumptions about people and their

situations, wondering about how much control a person has or doesn't have, and what we might do to help.

The good news of the Gospel is that God desires protection and care for the vulnerable. It's both a communal and an individual call. In consultation with God, we once again are called to determine what is ours to do to create the world that God intends. Remember that you were slaves, immigrants, vulnerable, or...at some point in your lives. You are here because someone helped you along the way, whether you admit it or not. "The true intent of these laws is the molding of character." The greatest power we have is the molding of our own character. If we don't do anything else, perhaps we could work on that.

As always, we'll make mistakes along the way. We'll miss the mark. But the worst thing we can do is give in and give up deciding that there is nothing we can do. With God, there is nothing we cannot do. But the work begins at home. It starts here.

"Let the little children come..." no matter who those children are. For all are children of God.

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.