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Exodus 23:7b, NIV

do not put an innocent or honest person to death, for I will not acquit the guilty.

Exodus 23:7b, ESV

do not kill the innocent and righteous, for I will not acquit the wicked.

Speak Up: An OD.

I'm changing many of the details of the following story to protect someone's privacy. There was a young woman whom I spoke with during a series of hospital visits over a period of several years. She had an illness that required a few high-risk surgeries. She was an addict and she used intravenous street drugs. She had had a bad childhood. She sometimes lived on the street, sleeping in a tent. We'll call her Nancy. Nancy had a long history of not complying with medical advice. She didn't take necessary medications, didn't go to follow-up exams, didn't stick to the diet she was supposed to follow, and didn't seek help when she had frightening symptoms. My understanding is that her illness would have been quite treatable early on with surgery and medication if she had been compliant with medical advice. But her condition snowballed. One day, Nancy was scheduled for yet another life-saving high-risk surgery. I'll get back to this.

Let's look at a brief quote from Exodus. This is one book of the Bible that has a very appropriate name. It covers the period from about 1450 B.C. to 1200 B.C. It is the account of what happens after Jacob and his extended family enter Egypt. Hundreds of years after they come to Egypt, the Israelites have been enslaved. Through the hand of God, the Pharaoh loses control of them, and the descendants of Jacob flee into the desert. The book ends with Moses, the leader of the Israelites, coming down from the mountain after forty days to find that the Israelites have abandoned God and turned to idolatry. They are worshipping a golden calf. Moses breaks the tablets that God has given him, tablets containing the Commandments. But God is forgiving. The people turn back to God, Moses goes back up the mountain, gets new tablets, and the Israelites erect a tabernacle to house the tablets. Moses will not enter the Promised Land with his people.

Our quote comes from deep within the Book of Exodus. This part of the book concerns the covenant between God and the Israelites. They are at the foot of Mt. Sinai. God has given Moses the Ten Commandments, sometimes called the Decalogue. But there is more detail that must be conveyed to the Israelites in order for them to understand how they must live. Moses acts as a mediator between God and God's people. While the Ten Commandments deliver firm, absolute rules that the people must follow, the material that Moses now conveys

from God to God's people concerns somewhat fuzzier issues. This is what all of us experience in life. Living by God's laws can be subtle. Moses delivers rules that go beyond the Ten Commandments. This material is often called the Book of the Covenant. It tells God's people how to prepare a proper altar to God, and how certain offenses are to be dealt with, such as what to do when one person physically harms another, or what to do when a person's property has been stolen or damaged. It also tells us how to behave in an ethical way. Our quote comes from the part of the Book of the Covenant that deals with ethical ways of living. In particular, 23:7 tells the Israelites that they must *"not put an innocent or honest person to death, for I will not acquit the guilty"*. I, of course, is God speaking through Moses. Although this is a good translation for modern readers, and it comes from the New International Version, perhaps a better translation can be found in the English Standard Version, which says: *"do not kill the innocent and righteous, for I will not acquit the wicked."* Notice the word "righteous". Yes, it means "honest", as the NIV says. But in Exodus, the Hebrew word that appears is *"saddiq"*. It's an important word, used very frequently in Scripture. It's related to the word lawful or just. In this context, it refers to someone's character. The Israelites are not to kill or put to death someone whose character is righteous and who strives to live the way God wants them to live. It's a subjective thing that can

be hard for an earthly legal system to judge. But our laws in this country descend from the Book of the Covenant. Even today, our courts try to follow this law, to not execute anyone who is righteous. We must look into the heart of a person.

What I want to talk about today is the responsibility that we all have in life to follow God's laws, to follow the Book of the Covenant, at least as much of it as is still relevant to Christians following the New Testament. There are rules about how to worship the Israelite God and how to follow the Israelite calendar that don't apply to us under the New Covenant, but when it comes to the parts of the Book of the Covenant that relate to ethical behavior, most of it is very applicable to us today. Certainly, we do not believe that someone who is righteous, who is innocent in their heart, should die. In fact, we have to be more than just reactive in following God's law: we must be proactive. It's not good enough to simply not sentence to death or kill a righteous person directly. We must do our best to always protect righteous people. There are times when U.S. law doesn't force us to act but when the Book of the Covenant does require us to act. God's laws are stricter than human laws. This is what is wrong with society today.

So, back to Nancy. She had friends and relatives who, like her, struggled with drug addiction. Nancy had been caught having illegal drugs in the hospital on multiple occasions. We think of nurses as people who are the hands-on

deliverers of medical care, the people who are near us when we are in the hospital, who are aware of our immediate situation, who administer medication and watch our vitals for us. Nurses take on tremendous responsibility when caring for patients. But they do a lot more. They comfort patients. They inform family members about the condition of their loved ones, and often this is a heart-breaking job. Nurses console people when loved ones die. Between their medical and nonmedical duties, nurses are kept running through twelve-hour shifts. Our modern society lacks a sense that the rest of us should be equally active, that we must ensure that no righteous person is harmed.

Nancy was being proactively protected by people, largely nurses. They were aware that Nancy had a problem with drug addiction. They asked the chaplains to help with this. We were tasked with carefully filtering those who were allowed to enter the hospital and see Nancy. The decision was made to allow no adults to visit her, as people had smuggled drugs into Nancy's room during previous hospital stays. She was an addict, and addicts will do just about anything to obtain drugs. We allowed only her children in to see her, and they had to be carefully supervised. I was called in one evening – the night before her big surgery – to escort her two kids in and out of the hospital. I met them with their paternal grandmother, who had custody of them, at the front door. It was

two very young girls. They were polite, mature kids. The older one was a loving, protective big sister, who held the smaller one's hand as we went up the stairs, took the little one's coat off outside their mom's room, and helped the younger one open the little carton of milk that a nurse had gotten for the smaller girl. Their mom was very frightened about her looming surgery, but she was joyous at seeing her girls. I remember how hollow and aged Nancy's young face appeared. I stayed with them in the ICU room; there was concern that some adult might have given one of the kids something illicit to pass on to their mother. The big one talked to her mother while the little one knelt on the floor, and using a chair as a desk, she drew pictures for her mommy. When it came time for the visit to end, they gave their mother hugs, the older girl promised to look after the younger one, and Nancy tearfully said goodbye. I led them out to grandma. I went back to Nancy's room and tried to calm her so that she could sleep before her surgery. She thanked me repeatedly for taking her kids in to see her, but she looked desperate. I went home. Nancy was due to be taken into the OR at 6 A.M.

Early the next morning, the phone woke Wendy and me. It was the chaplain who happened to be on call that morning, and she told me that Nancy was dead. She said that as soon as they had Nancy in the OR her heart stopped. The OR team worked furiously to restart her heart. She had OD'd and was dead.

People began to wonder if perhaps someone had slipped drugs into the hospital and given them to Nancy in her ICU room before her surgery. They searched through hospital video. They found Nancy's sister – who was also known to be an intravenous drug user - on hospital surveillance video. They discovered that very early that morning, Nancy's sister had shown up at the hospital and begged the nighttime administrator in charge of the hospital to be allowed in to see her sister before her big surgery. The administrator felt sorry for her. She was let in.

Many people worked hard to protect Nancy, but somebody who did not have her best interest in mind slipped into the hospital, and the two sisters must have gotten high together – just an hour or so before Nancy was taken to surgery. Soon thereafter, a syringe was found in Nancy's room. But here is the big question. Was Nancy *innocent and righteous*? Yes. She was an addict - born with a vulnerability that she was unable to conquer. But I am not laying the blame on the sister. The situation is more complex than that.

Consider this passage from the 31st Chapter of Proverbs. I took this from the NIV because I like the translation. These are verses 8 and 9:

⁸ *Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves,
for the rights of all who are destitute.*

⁹ *Speak up and judge fairly;
defend the rights of the poor and needy.*

The introduction to this Chapter says the following: *The sayings of King Lemuel—an inspired utterance his mother taught him.* Sometimes the word “utterance” is translated as “oracle”, which is not at all a good translation, and neither is “utterance”. What this really says is that this chapter consists of advice or commands for a King named Lemuel, given by his mother. We do not know who King Lemuel was. Some think that Lemuel was the pet-name that Solomon’s mother had for him. Other’s think that the word that is translated as “utterance” or “oracle”, that is, the Hebrew word “*massa*” is a reference to an area near Israel, and that King Lemuel is thus not a Jewish or Israelite King. But whoever this is, the important thing to note is that this is the advice by a mother when her son is becoming king. Perhaps his father died when he was too young to take the throne, and his mother was acting as the Queen Mother, and now Lemuel is finally old enough to take the throne. This is an instruction meant to guide a powerful leader as he takes over a kingdom. So, let’s consider this passage again:

⁸ *Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves,
for the rights of all who are destitute.*

⁹ *Speak up and judge fairly;
defend the rights of the poor and needy.*

The possible Queen Mother is telling her son that as a king he is responsible to speak up for those who cannot advocate for themselves, who have no assets, and

who are being judged. The important part for us here are the people who cannot speak for themselves. My personal feeling, as a pastor and a chaplain, is that we in the U.S. do a very poor job of guiding, helping, advocating for a wide class of people who have trouble caring for themselves. If someone has an addiction problem, has a personality disorder or some more severe psychological problem, if they have a dementia or they are high on the autistic spectrum, if they have had a stroke, or if they have any problem that limits their ability to manage their lives, or perhaps if they are a minor without a proper guardian looking after them, we might think that an advanced caring society would identify that person and guide them, perhaps in an ongoing fashion, maybe even for life, and not simply thrust responsibility for the person on medical and first responder professionals at critical moments. We would save a lot of money spent on medical care and prisons if we acted in a more preventative, long-term fashion. It is interesting that somewhere between two and three thousand years ago, some mother was advising her son to keep this in mind, but today, we are failing.

One of the principles of early Christianity was to be responsible for the welfare of others. The early Christians practiced charity, including providing food, money, housing, and physical protection – to non-Christians. It was enough to prevent a Roman Emperor named Julian in about 360 A.D. from being able to

revive paganism. People understood that Christians – and not the Roman government - took care of people. We need to get back to this principle, as a church and as a society. We must always do good and never do harm. Someone like Nancy should have been more than simply protected in the moment. She could have been rehabilitated, perhaps. But we did not speak up early enough and consistently enough.

I'm going to take the two different translations of our first quote, from Exodus, from the NIV and the ESV, and blend them together to get a translation that I happen to like: *do not kill the innocent and righteous, for I will not acquit the guilty*. When we refuse to take care of those who need help, when we let them fall to harm, through our societal inaction we are in fact killing the righteous. And for that, God will not acquit the guilty.