

## **THE FIRST FRUITS OF THANKSGIVING**

**November 18 and 19, 2018**

**Deuteronomy 26: 1-11**

A tribe of stateless people, had been wandering in the desert since the day they had been liberated from cruel oppression. Under the leadership of Moses, God had given them a long hoped for gift through the exodus and in today's Scripture they are about to enter the 'promised land.'

They had waited and wandered 40 years to find this place. Along the way they made mistakes. They grew impatient and turned to other Gods, they turned on Moses, they turned on each other. And so God gave them time to grow into a people before allowing them to enter the 'land of milk and honey.'

Now, as they prepare to possess the place they are to call home, Moses gives instructions on how to be obedient to the God who freed them, assembled them, instructed them, protected them, and would continue to provide for them.

Once they had taken possession of the land and settled in, Moses instructed them to bring as their offering of worship and obedience, the "first of the fruit of the soil."

And as they were offering their first fruits, they were to tell their story. To tell the hard parts and the painful parts of their journey from oppression to liberation. They were to

tell their story, with all its twists and turns, as they offered the first and best of the harvest, remembering the harvest would not have been possible without the blessing of God; without the bitter and the sweet.

We have an entire day set aside as a nation, when we turn our attention to those people and things—tangible and intangible—for which we are grateful. Like the wandering Hebrews, we are the descendants, most of us, of people who traveled to this land from far away. Also like the Hebrews, we have had our ups and downs, our conflicts, the moments in which our actions were filled with honor and courage, and the moments in which we failed in our common humanity. The good and the proud mingle together with the painful and the shameful.

This is our heritage, these are our lives.

The act of thanksgiving, in some way, should always involve holding together the bitter and the sweet, and knowing that, somehow, however improbably, we have been guided and cared for and blessed to be where we are today.

Thanksgiving doesn't happen without true awareness of the value of the gift; but even more so, thanksgiving is not complete without the appropriate response to the one who blesses.

As the Hebrews took possession of the promised land and settled in, their first response to God's faithfulness was, for themselves to respond with an offering of their "first fruits." They gave their best in obedient response to what

God had already done, not only providing for them in the bitter and painful past, but in the sweet blessings of their present.

They weren't to offer God the leftover fruit, the unusable, the rotten, the insect-ridden; they were to give him their best, their first, right off the top before they took any for themselves.

And they were to offer their first fruits in joyful celebration together with the Levites who were the upper crust, the ruling class of temple priests; and the aliens – the most vulnerable people, the ones without tribes or families to fall back on in hard times, the people most likely to fall into slavery. Everyone was invited to the celebration!

Our thanksgiving can never be separate from a loving response toward God and toward others. When we consider our lives, the beautiful and the painful, the bitter and the sweet, we begin to recognize that the God who blesses us doesn't intend for the blessings to stop with us.

Some time ago I came across a commentary on Thanksgiving written by an American missionary in Managua, Nicaragua. The man wrote, with no small amount of anger and bitterness, about how overfed we are in this country; and how this stands in stark contrast to what he saw among the poor in places like Nicaragua, and throughout the world. It's disturbing; but also not entirely wrong, and should be a bit humbling.

What credibility can we have with the rest of the world if we say we love them with the love of Christ, but put ourselves first? That ideology is built on the premise that our needs are more important than their needs, that we value our lives more than theirs. That ideology is certainly not rooted in the humility of Christ.

According to Christ, if we want to be first in the kingdom of God, then we have to be last. It's a seemingly upside down way of doing things that puts the interests and needs of others before our own and not the other way around.

Every person around the globe bears the image of God. The Body of Christ is multinational and ecumenical. God doesn't favor one country or one ethnicity over another; and neither should we. The blessings we receive are to be given away, shared, dispersed, like the pie and the stuffing and the cranberry sauce. Everybody gets some. That's God's vision for every human being on the planet.

Thanksgiving is a compound word – you remember what that means – a compound word combines two words to make one. Thanksgiving -- thanks and giving; it's the same relationship that exists between gratitude and action; faith and works; hearing the word and doing the word. As people of God, these qualities always go together; it is how we truly live out of what we believe. Without both parts, we risk forgetting who we are. Thanks and giving.

You see, putting aside all the other rituals and traditions of this particular holiday, the reason we come together as

families and friends, and as a nation this Thursday is so that we might really “do” something in gratitude for our abundance of blessings.

It’s the same reason that as the church, we are ever and always called to reach out beyond ourselves to welcome all and to help those in need. What we’re doing is taking our thanks to God and moving it toward the giving of ourselves for the sake of his son Jesus Christ.

And whether it comes in the form of filling up the Mitten Tree, or providing a dinner for the community, or in giving our first fruits offering every Sunday so that God’s work can continue to be done throughout the world, it all amounts to giving of ourselves in faithful obedience. It’s giving... thanks. It’s thanks... giving.

We are blessed, you know... and on every level. However discouraged or overwhelmed or apprehensive any of us happens to be; the fact remains that every generation that has gone before us has faced its share of challenges, has sought God’s presence and blessing, and has been guided along every good and hopeful pathway.

We are “the Wandering Aremeans” of this time and place and our God is even now moving us forward. And so you and I ought to be giving thanks for all of our many blessings: for every good meal we get to eat; for every cold night that we lay warm and secure at home in our own beds; for every fresh breath of life that enters our lungs; and for God's gifts of land and its bounty that is meant to be shared.

As we fill up our thanksgiving plates this year, may we also set a plate for our first fruits – dishing up ways to honor the Creator and to feed creation, before we feed ourselves.

May each one of us be truly thankful for what we’ve been given; and may our gratitude be reflected in lives lived in sacrificial love.

Amen and Amen.