

First Fruits: Deuteronomy 26: 1-15
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We are in the middle of our Live Generously Stewardship campaign. Next Sunday is Consecration Sunday, and we will take some time in morning and evening worship to fill out Estimate of Giving cards and then we will dedicate our gifts to God.

Today's passage is often used during stewardship campaigns, and I've preached on it before, but this week it surprised me. The voice we hear in this text is so different than the dominant voices we hear in our culture right now.

Two weeks ago, I preached on the story of God giving the Israelites the gift of manna in the wilderness. I shared that scholar Walter Brueggemann says that "the memory of Exodus, wilderness and manna assures that one's wealth will be regarded as a gift to be shared." Pharaoh's world is a world of selfishness and scarcity, and as God delivers them from slavery, God begins to create a new world for them. The manna story is the beginning of this project. God graciously and generously gives manna for everyone, for the common good. In this story, there is enough, but the manna must be shared.

In our passage from Deuteronomy for today, we hear the people of Israel remembering their story, remembering the gifts God has given them, the ways God has provided, and it is all for the sake of remembering the most vulnerable ones in their midst.

What we have in this passage is a sort of creed or statement of faith. As harvest begins, the people are to remember the gift that God has given them, by offering a gift of the first fruits to God in return. They present these gifts to the priest and then tell their story, the story of what God has done. What happens next though, is amazing. It's not that the gifts are given to God and those gifts disappear, and the people go home and their gift to God is wasted. After they give the gift of the first fruits, then it says, "Then you, together with the Levites (the priests) and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty God has given you."

The first fruits are given to God for the sake of a feast, a feast that includes the landless, the refugee, the immigrant. The passage continues, "when you have finished paying all the tithe

(10%) of the produce in the third year, giving it to the Levites, the aliens, the orphans, the widows, so that they may eat their fill within your towns..." Gifts are given to God so that the most vulnerable will have enough, so that rich and poor will feast together, relationships will be built, and the poor will be poor no longer.

In this passage, religious practice has a purpose, and the purpose of the practice is remembering the vulnerable neighbor. The purpose of the practice is to nurture and sustain a concern for the common good. God is still working on the project of creating an alternative to Pharaoh's world, here is another rehearsal of the manna story. There will be enough when gifts are shared.

I think this scripture points to the purpose of our worship and ministry. Worshipping this God of abundance and generosity will nurture our own generosity and our concern for the common good. This is central to why I believe in the church, and think what we do in worship is so important.

This passage also gives us a model for sharing, the tithe. The tithe, or giving 10% of one's income to the church is a spiritual practice within Christianity, one that nurtures and sustains generosity. Religious traditions have these recommendations. Zakat is one of the five pillars of Islam, this is the suggestion of giving 2.5% of one's accumulated wealth, of all of one's assets to charity. Christianity focuses on 10% of one's income. Lately, many churches, including ours talk more about the Modern Tithe. The Modern Tithe affirms that there are other organizations beyond the church through which God's work is being done, or that are contributing to the common good. The Modern Tithe invites us to work toward the goal of 10% of our total giving to the church and other organizations adding up to 10% of our income.

The Modern Tithe has been a helpful guide and goal for our family. I mentioned two weeks ago, that I'm feeling a greater sense of urgency about nurturing the generosity of communities. I think this topic is incredibly important, and as I've been reading about stewardship in congregations, an emerging best practice is for pastors to be sharing more specifics about their own giving. In that spirit, I'll share some about our approach to giving. And yes, Sara and I have talked about this, and have mutually agreed to share this part of our faith.

I also share our story fully aware that we all live in the midst of different financial circumstances, and that not all households are like ours with two adults committed to the same faith community. Different circumstances will lead to different decisions. This is simply how we have been approaching our giving over the last few years.

As we moved to Northfield five years ago, we were living through a period of a few years with some health issues in our house that had a significant impact on our monthly expenses. We had enough, but we had to pull back on some things to make everything work out, and this included our giving. We didn't feel great about this, but it was where we were. We decided we could give 5% of my income to the church, and we gave some other gifts to organizations that are important to us. But we also wanted to grow our giving and grow towards the goal of the Modern Tithe over time.

Over the last five years, the health issues that were impacting our finances steadily resolved themselves, and we've been increasing our gift to the church through the annual campaign and the Renewing the Faith Capital campaign by a percent of my income each year. Then we have given the same percentage of other household income to other organizations that we care about.

This year we will be giving what we have been giving to the annual campaign, plus what we have given to the Renewing the Faith Campaign, plus a percent of my income, so that we will be giving roughly 10% of my income to First UCC. Our goal is also to give 10% of our other household income to organizations we care about. We, of course, have other financial goals, and we can meet those goals as well.

We give because this is one way we can live generously. We also give because we believe in this church.

We are grateful for a church that for a long time has been holding the head and the heart together. From the very beginning, as the founders of this church stretched themselves to start what became Carleton college, they were doing the dance of holding the best of an ancient faith tradition together with all that they were learning about the world. Some of us have wondered if

we can truly be Christian because we accept and value education, and the sciences, and we don't know if our worldview is compatible with this ancient faith.

Since its beginning, this church has been saying, "yes, these two worldviews can be held together. They can be mutually beneficial, they can add meaning to one another." I'm grateful for this witness. It holds two parts of me together and adds meaning and hope to my life. I'm grateful for this church as it helps people find their place within Christianity when they didn't know if there was room for them.

We give because we are grateful for the formation our children have received. We know that at First UCC, our children will hear good theology, theology that won't have to be unlearned as they get older. We are grateful for the gift that the Our Whole Lives program is offering, and we are excited about the possibility of sharing Our Whole Lives with more youth in Northfield and continuing the process of steadily strengthening our youth ministry. As your bulletin insert explains, as our giving grows as a congregation, our Council believes that a next faithful step for our ministry is to add a youth programming staff person who would add capacity for youth ministry.

We are grateful for this congregation's long history of witnessing for justice and peace. Our deep commitment to Our Church's Wider Mission and the witness of the whole United Church of Christ that works for a just world for all, starting the Community Action Center, becoming an Open and Affirming Congregation in the early 1990's and engaging Northfield in a conversation about sexuality and AIDS. Putting solar panels on our roof, encouraging the community solar movement, being a part of the overground railroad in the 80's and providing housing for refugees as they were traveling to Canada, and declaring ourselves a Sanctuary congregation today, and encouraging over 50 other ISAIAH MN churches and a dozen other UCC churches in Minnesota to do the same, and some are providing shelter to immigrants as we sit here today. This church's history and present give us hope.

Finally, we give because we experience the sustaining and life-giving grace of God here, in relationship with you. We have laughed with you and cried with you, and you inspire us too. We experience the Sacred here, and we trust that God is with us when we go about the rest of our week.

This is some of why we will be offering our first fruits, and why we choose to give to this church as it nurtures our concern for and commitment to the common good. Amen.