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February 21, 2010 • Lent 1C
Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Our Lenten scriptures remind us of ways that God has blessed us. And how God calls us to respond in faith as disciples. The theme and the season help us to reconsider what it means to follow Jesus, here and now.

Today we receive rather detailed instructions about preparing for celebrations. Thankfully, it's not like those gigantic wedding planning books. What celebrations have you been a part of lately?

There are celebrations after war ends – or when someone has returned alive and well, from serving abroad in the military. There is joy-filled merriment when health has been restored after a serious illness. From Super Bowl wins to proms to golden wedding anniversaries. Graduations and retirement parties. Family and friends, neighbors and strangers gather. We eat, drink, play, and try to honor the moment.

Our first lesson, from Deuteronomy, gives us guidance for celebrating. And the center of this text, and of the celebrating process, is God. That's because any particular festivity only seems to be about something else – a sports victory, or

crops being harvested. God is the first source of all the blessings in our lives. God is where our thanksgivings should begin, and end.

Our passage instructed people on how to start a celebration – which probably occurred annually, when the crops were harvested. After arriving at the Jewish priest, it instructed Jews to confess God’s blessings. It gave a very clear script. The faithful were to speak back at the beginning. The “wandering Aramean” ancestor was a way of speaking of Abraham, whom God sent to find a new land. The faithful were to remember that he became a great nation, mighty and populous (*Deut 26:5*). Then it moved on through salvation history to Israel’s delivery from slavery, under the leadership of Moses. Our confirmation students just studied this story in the book of Exodus. They were brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm (*26:8*). God gave us this land, a land of milk and honey. The faithful Israelite would recall all these great acts that God had done in her people’s history. Interestingly, there is nothing about the actual crops that were just harvested – the things that brought people to the sanctuary. No, it’s all about God and God’s gracious relationship with the people.

The author of Deuteronomy guided people's response beyond what was confessed. Giving joyful thanks with words was certainly good, but there was more that is called for. When gifts have been abundant and ongoing. The response was to share give back. The recounting of salvation history ended with, "So now I bring the first fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me." (26:10) We are to set down a gift of thanksgiving – the first and best fruits of our labors – before God and bow down in worship. (26:11) Our offering to God of our first fruits is an act of worship.

This is why we have offering during our worship services. It's not just that our congregation needs to pay the bills—though we do have bills to pay. Offering was an important part of worship for the early Christian communities who met in people's homes. They didn't have things like old buildings to care for, or gas bills to pay. They did make sure that the apostles had their needs met. But these home churches sent money to congregations – in Jerusalem, or those going through hard times. What each house church did with the money offered to God may have varied, but the act of giving to God was important. In this passage, the question of amount doesn't matter at all. It is simply a matter of doing it.

Today's text makes me think about our offering a bit differently. I have been working in the church for over a decade. Even when I was a youth minister, Sunday

mornings were busy times. It was always far simpler for me to write one check that covers my offering for several weeks at a time. That way, it didn't – and doesn't – matter if I forget about it. Because I will forget; it's a guarantee. This kind of strategy may still be helpful for many people for the bulk of our intentional financial contributions to the church.

But the Word reminds us today that our giving to God is important to our Christian worship. It is important as a ritual just as the passing the peace is important as a ritual. It is a reminder of God's Spirit that puts us in relationship with one another – even folks who we do not know – even people who we do not like. The peace is a reminder of Jesus' gift of peace that surpasses our understanding, The peace that we pray will reign over all of creation, Christ's peace that we bear with us wherever we go. Sometimes we can share peace with every single person in the room, but not always. In some seasons, it is harder to do wisely – with colds and flus running around. No matter what, the church still passes the peace in some form – even if it is through words and not touch.

We do it, because it is an important part of who we are as Christians, And how we respond to the word that we hear. Our offering to God is similarly important as an act of worship and response to the word. Our choices about the amount of money reflect our resources, our needs, and our faith. Regardless of the amount, it's the act

of giving that is essential to our worship of our gracious God. We are changed when we do this, week after week. We become generous creatures of our infinitely generous God. We become stewards of creation and our belongings. Not clinging to them – but caring for them for as long as they are with us.

We confess our blessings and give thanks. And then we celebrate! We throw a party of thanksgiving for what God has given us. And we don't do that alone, or with just our family. We gather – including the Levites, who were the Jewish priests – and the aliens (or non-Jews) who live among us. Whether people share our faith or not. We celebrate God's gifts and grace with the neighbors whom we have been given.

God calls to us today, and invites us to consider our celebrations anew. They are occasions for giving constant thanks to God. For our creation, and salvation, and blessing. The Word's guidance may call each of us to stretch differently. Do we give thanks to God first in our celebrations for all that we have received? That may seem more natural at weddings or funerals than at sports victories. Do we give thanks by regularly giving our first fruits over to God's purposes?

The Spirit continues to pour gifts of blessing upon us. At the same time, she nudges us, invites us, and prepares us, to participate in lives of thanksgiving and celebration each day of our lives. Thanks be to God.