

Tell the Story

October 8, 2023

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Deuteronomy 26:1-15

As I mentioned earlier, today is the beginning of our Stewardship Season, meaning for the next three weeks we will be highlighting our congregation's Stewardship Campaign, in which we will be asking members of the congregation to faithfully consider their financial pledge for 2024. Stewardship- a theological word that means the giving of our money, time, and resources for the work of the church and our Stewardship is intricately connected with our congregation's ability to respond to the world's needs. Every Single pledge Represents an important investment in the life of our congregation. And your pledge for the upcoming year will be used to support the many faith filled ministries of this congregation.

As Associate pastor for Christian Formation, I am charged with the care of the youth, young adults, and Mission programs of our congregation and it is a privilege to see all the ways that God is working in these groups!

- Youth group is growing and thriving; last week Confirmation began, new youth joining our fellowship, the youth at Lewinsville are truly a blessing to get to be with
- The Young Adult program is also growing. The Young Adult group meets monthly; we also plan special fun events throughout the year, and we have an annual retreat in January
- Mission and Service is making an impact in our community and world:
 - Good Samaritan Day last week, a young member who served was 5 years old, and I won't say who was the oldest :) but all generations were able to come together and serve our neighbors together.
 - Made and delivered 120 meals to LRR
 - Made 700 coffee Packets for Miriam's Kitchen
 - Delivered donated baby items to our refugee family
 - Relieved Jill's House staff at the end of the weekend cleaning duties, while the staff at a home cooked meal.
 - Refugee Resettlement Team- helping to resettle our third family
 - Help furnish apartment
 - Help get acclimated to life in Northern VA
 - Now helping to pay their rent and help them be set up for long term sustainability in USA
 - Kenya Unite Orphanage- a Mission partner in Kenya that Lewinsville is a founding member. Alan and Madison traveled there this summer, and there are many opportunities for our congregation to continue supporting this important mission.
 - Many more mission partnerships are thriving

Along with Stewardship, today is also Climate in the pulpit Sunday. Climate in the Pulpit is a partnership with our mission partner Interfaith Power and Light (IPL), which invites churches, synagogues, and mosques to lift up creation and climate care in our worship services, as a way of affirming that care for the earth is a religious commitment and is part of our responsibility and calling to be stewards of God's good gifts. ** How we treat the earth matters, and it doesn't just matter for

the sake of the earth (which we are called to be stewards of), but it matters because we all live on this earth together and our experience of life on this planet is a shared experience. What I do affects how you get to live on this planet. Ultimately our home, planet earth, is not limitless; we live on a planet with finite resources. Which means for some to use more than their fair share means that someone else is left to be at risk and with not enough.

For whatever reason climate change is considered by many to be a partisan topic or potentially a polarizing conversation and yet today we are lifting up TWO topics that can be challenging - the Stewardship of our money and the Stewardship of our earth.

Pope Francis states in his cyclical on climate change:

We are not faced with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the underprivileged, and at the same time protecting nature.

With this in mind, we turn to the book of Deuteronomy which is the fifth book of the Hebrew Bible and is attributed to Moses as his farewell address to the Israelites as they prepare to enter the Promised Land. The instructions stated by Moses in Deuteronomy are given to Israel to enable them to maintain the kind of community and relationship with God that will keep God's good gift in harmony with God's will through the ages.

In our passage today, Moses gives instructions about a celebration that is to happen after the harvest. There is to be a First Fruits celebration. Each person with access to the land is to bring a portion of their first harvest to the temple. This seems pretty self-explanatory, not too different than most concepts of stewardship. We believe that all we have are gifts from God and so we give a portion back to God to say thank you yet, this is ONLY half the command, and what follows puts the gift in context and opens up the meaning stewardship. There is more to the act of giving than just giving.

Moses instructs that the first fruits offering is to be used for a celebration; however, this celebration is not just a frivolous party to donate to, but is rather an important act of worship. Moses instructs that each person bringing the first fruits offering is to recite a specific speech/ the giver is to retell the Israelites story, the speech is a narrative of the history of Israel, going all the way back to Abraham and Jacob and to God's deliverance of the Israelites from the Egyptians. But it is interesting to note that when they retell the story it is not done in a detached impersonal way; rather the people giving their first fruits are instructed to speak personally saying **MY** ancestor was a wandering Aramean. When the Egyptians treated **US** harshly **WE** cried to the LORD who heard **OUR** voice and God brought **US** out of Egypt with a mighty hand and brought **US** here into this place and this land so now I bring the first of the fruits of the land that you OH LORD have given **ME**.

It is interesting to me that this is not a retelling of the distant ancient past; rather, the language given is that the work of God, hearing and delivering God's people is for all generations, it is for those of the past, and it is for the one saying it at the celebration, and it is for you and me today, and this act of giving the first fruits is a way for all generations to participate in the free gift of salvation and deliverance of God. Giving is paired with Confessing. We participate by telling and retelling the story of

God's Goodness and redemption. Stewardship is saying thank you to God but it is also a personal confession of the goodness of God and the way in which God has delivered each of us.

In the final verse of the Duet Passage Moses also instructs that gratitude and worship are still not enough, the picture of God is not complete without the Levite and the alien, meaning those who do not have direct access to the land. The reference to the Levites is an inclusion of the priests in the community. Priests were always from the tribe of Levi and did not have their own land to harvest from because they lived at the temple. This verse also references what the NRSV translates as "alien"; other translations translate the word as *sojourner* or as *strange*. But here Moses is instructing the Israelites that this first fruits celebration is not complete unless it includes those who wander with no land to call their own. In other words the poor, outcast, or refugees. By including those who are not able to bring their own first fruit we see that the celebration of God's Kingdom is not complete without the wanderers, though they are not giving produce, they bring themselves to the table of God and participate in the joy of God's bounty. And that is what stewardship is about, bringing what we can to offer thanks and participate in God's redemptive activity in the world, and bringing ourselves, our full beings to the table of God to rejoice in God's good gifts alongside our fellow community members!

Stewardship is about responding to God's call to bring our first fruits with an open and willing spirit to share God's gift with each other and our larger community.

Our call to Stewardship asks us to offer refuge to those who are forced into extremely dangerous situations and are just trying to survive. And this is where I think stewardship of our planet fits in. Because many who wander in our world are fleeing from their homes that are inhabitable because of Climate Change. Katharine Hayhoe states in her book *Saving Us: A Climate Scientist's Case for Hope and Healing in a Divided World*:

"Climate change disproportionately affects the poor, the hungry, and the sick, the very ones the Bible instructs us to care for and love....Climate change amplifies hunger and poverty, increasing risks of resource scarcity that can in turn exacerbate political instability and even create or worsen refugee crises. Those most vulnerable to climate change are the same people who already suffer from malnutrition, food shortages, water scarcity, and disease." (18)

The Presbyterian (USA) book of Order states that:

The Christian life is an offering of one's self to God. In worship the people are presented with the costly self-offering of Jesus Christ, are claimed and set free by him, and are led to respond by offering to him their lives, their particular gifts and abilities, and their material goods.

Stewardship of our money and stewardship of our planet, like all other Worship practices, can be soul giving, life renewing, and a way of acting out our faith that benefits our whole community and our planet; it is a way of receiving the gifts of God's goodness for everyone. As we focus on Stewardship the next couple of Sundays, and think about the upcoming year 2024, let's give what we can because it is an act of confession, an act of joy, and an act of caring for one another; we give what we can so that others who cannot give can come to the celebration! We give, we share, and we celebrate! Let's be about the work of telling the story! Let's tell the story of God's Love for each of us; let us Live in the Goodness of God freed to give and receive. Amen

Let us Pray: Gracious God, you call us to be Stewards of our money, time, talents, and our earth. Our hearts are filled with gratitude for the blessings you have bestowed upon us, We seek your guidance and wisdom to be good stewards of both our finances and the precious planet you have gifted us. God help us to celebrate all that we have and freed to share it with all we encounter. In your holy name we pray. Amen