

FIRST AND BEST
Thanksgiving Sunday
Deuteronomy 26:1-11

I find it fascinating that this whole detailed liturgy
that Ross just outlined for the children—
the whole set of instructions about what to do with the harvest,
how to bring it to God in worship,
who to give it to, what to say,
and how to eat it, and with whom—
all those instructions were given to the people
before they set foot in the promised land,
before the first seed was planted,
before the first brick was laid on their houses and barns,
before they knew whether they'd even *have* a harvest to bring.

While they are still a *wandering* people,
God tells them how to worship as a *settled* people.
In the wilderness, they know how much they need God.
They're reminded every day they wait for manna and quail
coming straight from God's hands.
But when once they live in houses and till the soil,
they'll start to forget life is pure gift.
They'll think life is something they make happen.
And they start to be less grateful.

So they are given this harvest liturgy.
They take the first and best portion of their harvest
put it in a basket,
bring it to the God, represented by the priest,
and retell their story.
They rehearse it from the beginning to the present,
naming all the ways God upheld them and provided for them.

Then they prepare the big feast . . . and *everyone* joins in.
The Levites, the aliens, the orphans, the widows.
All the people without property rights.

And they were taught this whole liturgy *in advance*.

As a training exercise. A discipline.
A body-building act of worship that would form them.

Left on our own, we *will* forget.
We *will* forget that it's all God's to begin with.
We *will* forget that we are only trustees.
We *will* start acting like owners of all our stuff.

We don't learn to be good trustees by default.
We learn by being intentional and disciplined.

The default mode is self-preservation, greed, materialism,
to act like owners.
By default we use our resources according to what pleases us,
what satisfies our desires and drives,
what brings us comfort and security.
By default we forget that decisions we make about *all* that we have,
not just ten percent, but *all* of what we have,
are the decisions of trustees, not owners.

But as disciplined good trustees, we decide how to use
our money, our houses and land,
our material possessions, our time and talents,
in a way that is true to the mission and vision of the owner.
It's not *our* priorities that guide how we use our stuff.
It's the priorities and mission of *God*, who owns it all—
God whose mission it is to reconcile all creation.
God whose priority is to bring healing to the broken,
and release to the captives.

If we are using God's stuff in any *other* way,
such as to feed our selfish desires,
or to amass wealth, comfort, and security for ourselves,
or to wield power over others,
then we will have to answer to the owner.

Stewardship would be a lot easier, if it was mainly about tithing.
Tithing is a math issue.

If you know how to move a decimal point,
you know how to tithe.

How *easy* it would be,
if we *only* had to relinquish ten percent to God,
and use the rest however we please.

But *that's* not stewardship.

Stewardship is being God's responsible and disciplined trustee
for *all* of God's stuff
with which God generously trusts us.

Whenever we receive an offering in worship
we are to give knowing that God trusts us.
And *especially*, in this annual offering ritual,
in which we *also* offer our Faith Promise for the coming year,
we do so with an even *greater* awareness,
that God trusts us with *all* that we have.
God is the one who freed us from aimless wandering,
brought us into a land of productivity,
and trusts us to use *all* that productivity for God's mission.
So as an act of gratitude
that reminds us who we are,
and reminds us who owns our stuff,
we bring our basket of First Fruits—
the first and the best of the harvest of our lives.
We *don't* bring the leftovers—
the portion we calculate, after subtracting everything *else*,
that we can afford to give.

So let me just say this.

If you came today planning to drop your Faith Promise card in the basket,
but now as you *think* about it,
it feels more like a calculated remainder,
and less like offering up your first and best,
just *hold on* to the card for the time being.

Next Sunday will work *just* as well.

Or if, as I'm sure is the case for some,
you came unprepared

because you just didn't get around to thinking about it,
by all means, *please don't* quick fill it out
with some amount that comes to mind as being reasonable.
Take your time. Take another week if you need it.
God gets far more pleasure out of our gifts
that reflect our deep trust in God
and gratitude for the trust God has *in us*,
than gifts given to meet an obligation or a deadline.

But having *said* that, we *are* now going to have a giving party.
We are going to celebrate God's bounty,
whether we have a little or a lot at our disposal.

I think that *all* of us, even with a moment's reflection,
can think of *some* way that God is being bountiful in our lives.
It may or may *not look* bountiful in terms of finances
or houses or land or jobs or other material resources.
But God, and God's many gifts in life, are generous and bountiful.
And all of us have the capacity *today*, right *now*,
to express our gratitude through the act of giving.
I worshiped in Tanzania some years ago,
in a small, rural Mennonite church.
They were as materially poor
as *any* Christians I have met.
But their offering was more joyful and celebrative,
than any we've *ever* had at Park View.
And *everyone* participated in the offering procession,
from the youngest to oldest.

So this morning we are going to give joyfully—whether little or much—
to the God who trusts us with his bounty.

The offering will be brought forward in a procession,
Deuteronomy-style; African-style.

We will put all our offering in these large baskets,
our regular weekly offering,
as well as—for those who believe they are ready—
the Faith Promise cards

Everyone gets in on the act. Every man, woman, and child.

Not everyone came prepared with a gift in their hands,
but that's not a problem.
It's the responsibility of you who *do* have something to bring,
to check with your neighbors sitting near you.
If their hands are empty, share what you have.
Pass any loose bills and change around,
until *everyone* has something to bring.
It's not the amount that's important, it's the participation.
Let's go ahead and do that now.
Check with each other, make sure everyone is ready.

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Let us give with joy, with generosity,
and give as if God trusted us.
Because, in fact, God does.

—*Phil Kniss, November 21, 2010*