

In God We Trust
Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Acts 4:32-35
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Rev. Nancy F. Dolan
First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, Illinois

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, 'Today I declare to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us.' When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God, you shall make this response before the Lord your God: 'A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labour on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me.' You shall set it down before the Lord your God and bow down before the Lord your God. Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.

Acts 4:32-25

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

I've been thinking a lot about resiliency lately. Maybe it's from witnessing the hurricanes, earthquakes, and wildfires, and the human capacity to bounce back from such adversity. Maybe it's just day to day ministry that gets me thinking about the resiliency of people who get through trauma, grief, and heartbreaking loss. But I'm also thinking about the resiliency of the church, and what's required to preach the gospel in a world of very conflicting messages. The resiliency needed to be "deliverers of hope," as Dr. Pearce challenged us. As a pastor of transitions, I have the privilege of witnessing first-hand the resilience of communities of faith – bouncing back from hardship to find themselves stronger and more equipped for their mission in the world. We know this at First Pres. We have repeatedly bounced back from adversity in our history. We even name resilience as necessary for discipleship in our mission of "sending well-equipped disciples of Jesus into the world: compassionate, generous, wise, and *resilient*."

What I haven't thought much about as it relates to resiliency, until my study of the texts for this week, is the role of giving, specifically of *sacrificial* giving, in building resiliency in the life of believers. What our texts point us to today is that our resiliency is not born of our own success, not based on our own ability or means to get through challenging times. *Our resiliency as disciples of Christ is born out of the truth that our power comes from God.*

As we enter our Old Testament lesson today, we find the Israelites on the edge of the Promised Land, receiving the laws that would bind them in community together. When we think of the laws of the Hebrew Scriptures, it's helpful to remind ourselves that the law was a means for protecting community, a way of promoting compassion for one another as the Israelites settled into the land that God had prepared for them. The law, in a sense, was

part of the toolkit God gave the people of God to build up community so that they could be a blessing in the world (Gen 12:2).

Today's reading is the last portion of this code of law; and its focus is gratitude and giving. Here the community is instructed that when they get to the land God is giving to them, when they finally arrive out of the wilderness into this promised land, they are to give their "first fruits" to God in response to God's tremendous grace and mercy that has rescued them from brutal slavery. Take some of the "first of all the fruit of the ground," it reads, "put it in a basket" and bring it to the altar of the Lord (v.2). The people are commanded to bring the very first of what the land produces; the first of your income if you will, and give it to God.

I think today the impact of "first fruits" is a little bit lost on us. Good food is readily available in abundance. Hunger for us usually means you forgot to bring your lunch that day, or you were too busy to eat. But if you take away Jewel and Sunset Foods, and find yourself depending on the land for your survival, "first fruits" becomes a significant sacrifice. After your first harvest, you don't know if the land will produce more. Or, if drought, disease, and pests will destroy your next crop. So the practice of giving the first of your harvest to God provides a repeated reminder that you are completely dependent on God for your very existence. This sacrificial giving is a proclamation that our very survival comes from God. It's a declaration by that community and each individual that it is in God we trust.

This is a big shift in the way many of us think of giving. Rather than figuring out our giving by what's left over, whether money or time, or our giving as just one other line-item in our budget, this first fruits command calls us to give the *best* of what we have *first*, and then watch God provide what we

need. This is completely countercultural, and even as I say it the voices in our heads are responding how impractical it is. There is great irony in our coins reading, "In God We Trust." Our culture points elsewhere. In financial security, we trust. In our expertise, we trust. In our success and achievement, we trust. But all of that is fleeting, as Jesus taught. Staking our lives on money or success or achievement is like building the house on sand rather than a solid foundation (Matt 24-27). Not a resilient house, but a house that can be blown down when a crisis hits, when challenges plague us, when things don't go our way. God desires to build a stronger, more resilient community, built on the recognition of *God's* power, the power that can overcome anything, even death.

The American Psychological Association describes resiliency as "adapting well in the face of stress." (<http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience.aspx>). One of the ways they cite to build resiliency is to review past experiences and the sources of strength that got you through those times. They must have taken a page out Deuteronomy for that tip! This law of first fruits goes on to say that as you give the basket of your offering to the priest, you also must recite the story of your exodus, as a reminder of God's hand that brought you out of Egypt, provided for you in the wilderness, and gave you this land. In this act of sacrificial giving, the people of God are prompted to first remember their experience and the source of strength that got them through. In other words, to remember your dependence on God and God's abundant faithfulness to you.

We each can recall a time, or many times, in our lives that we got through only by God's grace. And we each can name achievements and joys that we know came from God. We'd like to think that remembering those would

increase our trust in God, our resilience. But we do forget. We need regular reminders of our utter dependence on God, and on God's steadfast love and provision. Our culture reinforces our self-sufficiency, our expertise, our wisdom. We need a solid foundation of reminders that God provides. That God gives the power. That great is God's faithfulness. The discipline of first fruits does that. We give to God our very best, first, trusting in God. And then what happens? Then, our trust grows as we discover the bounty that God delivers.

I notice we typically talk about giving to God *because* we trust in God, and that's certainly part of it. But this law points to an additional cause and effect – giving and then discovering you *can* trust in God. This tells us that giving is not only a measure of our faith but also a *means to faith*, a way to grow your trust and your relationship with your Creator and Provider. And it tells us that giving is a means to build resiliency, discovering that you don't have to rely on your own power, but instead you can rely on God's.

What would a community look like that trusted like that? What would the impact be on a community of faith that believed in the power of God, enough to sacrifice everything? A community that didn't believe the falsehood it was all up to them, or any one leader or person? It's difficult for people like us to imagine, frankly, people who are extremely successful from the world's standards. We've worked hard for what we have. We climbed the "ladder of success," if you will. We do trust in our own power and capabilities. But that perspective often fails to acknowledge our privilege that helped get us there – whether our white privilege, or our roots in socio-economic privilege. *And it ignores God's hand in our abundance.* A community that trusts enough to place their first fruits, their very best, before God will find themselves fueled

by a power that enables them to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the world, despite all odds.

This power is what we see in the community in our reading from Acts; the earliest believers who found themselves filled with the power to spread the gospel to a world that rejected it. That community is described as having "one heart and soul, sharing everything. They distributed what they collected, and there was not a needy person among them. And sharing all they had, they received *great power* to witness to the world.

Notice their sacrificial giving; all their material goods. They shared everything, so that no one was in need. And they were filled with the power for their mission. In fact, giving up what they had and sharing it was their *central witness* to the truth of the transformative powers of the gospel; a tangible sign of Jesus' message and God's provision. In our weakness, God is strong (2 Cor 12:9-10). This early community, filled with gratitude for the saving act of God in Jesus Christ, gave sacrificially, and that was the foundation of the community responsible for spreading the gospel to the world. With that firm foundation, they began their mission *resilient*, not in need but instead trusting that God's power would sustain them, not their own; *God's* provision, not theirs. Trusting in God's mercy and God's faithfulness, not that of any human or human institution, they set out to make disciples. The call to us today.

We are all beginning to receive our pledge cards for next year, and determining what our giving to the church will look like. As we do, we might be encouraged to consider the invitation in today's lessons – giving as a path to resiliency and faith. Giving so generously, in response to God's abundant generosity, that we actually give up some control and live into our dependence

on God's provision; so that we might fully know God's power. Giving to the extent that we will be DEcreased so that God is INcreased (John 3:30).

At the end of the Deuteronomy text, verse 11, after the first fruits were laid down before the Lord, we read that the Israelites, the Levites and all the outsiders would then celebrate the bounty of God. After they gave the whole community celebrated. When we celebrate God's bounty on our own Commitment Celebration Sunday, November 12, we'll pass these very baskets and bring them before God much like they did in ancient times. And by God's grace, these baskets will represent not only our giving but also the power of Christ in us. The baskets will represent our declaration that we will not put our trust in the power of this world *or on our own strength*, but in *God's* power. That we will not put our trust in the trappings of this world, but in the freedom that is in Christ. That we will not give in to the fears of this world, but instead stand in the faith and confidence of the children of God.

And like the Israelites, we will celebrate. We will celebrate as a people and a church who know their power is from above. As a community of faith ready to risk for the Kingdom; ready to let go for the redemption and restoration God has in store. A community that is not surviving but thriving by the power of God in Jesus Christ. Now those will be some resilient disciples. And *that* will be a witness to the world that in *God* we trust. May it be so!