

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

First Sunday in Lent (Series C)

Lessons for the Day: Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13**Why Bother?**

March 6, 2022

“When you come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance and have taken possession of it and live in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from your land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket, and you shall go to the place that the Lord your God will choose, to make his name to dwell there. And you shall go to the priest who is in office at that time and say to him, ‘I declare today to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our fathers to give us.’ Then the priest shall take the basket from your hand and set it down before the altar of the Lord your God. “And you shall make response before the Lord your God, ‘A wandering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labour. Then we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders. And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which you, O Lord, have given me.’ And you shall set it down before the Lord your God and worship before the Lord your God. And you shall rejoice in all the good that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house, you, and the Levite, and the sojourner who is among you.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

By the grace of God we have once again entered another Lenten season, and with it the time of meditation and reflection that makes us mindful of all that our dear Saviour, Jesus Christ, was willing to do for us, so that we might be forgiven and have life with Him in the glory of His eternal kingdom. As we ponder the wonder of this great love of God for sinners like you and me, we have certain customs and practices that are designed to focus our thoughts on the cross and suffering of our Lord. This past Ash Wednesday, we again offered an “imposition of ashes” for those who desired it. The ashes from the burned palms from the previous Palm Sunday are applied to the forehead of those at the altar, with the reminder: “You are dust, and to dust you will return”. Maybe you saw people with that smudged, black cross on their foreheads, and were reminded that the dirt of our sin can only be cleansed through the cross.

Another Lenten practice for many people is the idea of “giving up” something for Lent. This practice, like the imposition of ashes, is what we call an “adiaphora”: something neither commanded nor forbidden in Scripture. It would be wrong for the church to make some sort of rule requiring its members to do these things since Scripture itself does not require them. If, on the other hand, a Christian wants to give something up for Lent as a way of remembering and personalizing the great sacrifice that Christ made on the cross for our sins, then that Christian is certainly free to do so, as long as they do not begin to think that they are somehow better than those who do not choose to do this.

For the devout Christian, who knows all too well the terrible depth of our sin, these practices and customs all seem to make sense. But many others may wonder, “why bother?” Why deny yourself chocolate or television or anything else? Does it change the fact that Jesus died on that cross to take away our sins? Absolutely not. We don’t add anything to Christ’s sacrifice for us by our actions. Having ashes on our forehead doesn’t atone for the sins that still fill our hearts and lives. But we do these things so that we will remember, with grateful hearts, all that Christ has done to give us life.

When the people of Israel were preparing to go into the promised land Moses commanded them that they were to bring their firstfruits to the Lord as a sacrifice of thanksgiving. In bringing these gifts, the people were rejoicing in the love so great that it brought them from slavery to freedom; from certain death to a blessed life. More than that, the very fact that they had these gifts to give was the proof of a great truth: that God had been faithful and had brought His people the victory that He had promised to them.

You may be familiar with the expression, “the proof is in the pudding”. The phrase is from the novel, *Don Quixote*, where the entire phrase is: “The proof of the pudding is the eating.” That is what the offering of the firstfruits was. The very fact that the gifts could be offered before the Lord was the proof that God had brought His people to the promised land. There would be no gift to offer if it had not first been given to them by the Lord. That is why it wasn’t just a matter of bringing the firstfruits of the promised land before the Lord. There was a confession of faith that was to go with this gift. *“And you shall make response before the Lord your God, ‘A wandering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned*

there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labour. Then we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders. And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which you, O Lord, have given me.'

The gift—and the confession of faith that went with it—bore witness that God had indeed done what He had promised. It was a testimony to the fact that the Lord is always faithful to His promises.

When we bring our firstfruits to the Lord, we have the chance to rejoice and remember what God has already done for us that we *may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness* (SC, Second Article) More than that, the very fact that we can bring our firstfruits is the assurance, the guarantee and the declaration of all that God has done, is doing and will do for us. It is the proof, if you will, that all Christ has done through His death and resurrection have been done for us. I like those words of the psalmist who declares: ***Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.*** (Psalm 103:1-5 - ESV) Think about all these things: forgiveness, healing, daily blessings, redemption and the assurance of God's steadfast love and mercy. Would we have these things apart from the grace of God that has so freely bestowed these blessings upon us? We don't deserve these things. We deserve God's wrath and judgement. We deserve His punishment because of our sinfulness. We deserve to suffer the torments of eternal death in hell because we have turned from the One who is our Maker and Redeemer. But that isn't our fate. Rather, as Paul tells us: ***He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*** (Colossians 1:13-14 - ESV)

The firstfruits of our lives become the confession of faith and trust that knows that we have this deliverance; that we have this forgiveness. I am sure that many people heard the words *firstfruits* and thought, "oh, here's another sermon on giving our money to the church. It is true that our tithes and offerings do indeed bear witness to the fact that all that we are and all that we have is a gift from God. We give because He has first entrusted it to us. But there are many firstfruits for our lives. Do you remember the story of the woman of less than good repute, who came and anointed Jesus' feet with her tears, wiping them with her hair, and then anointing his feet with perfume? When this happened, Simon, the Pharisee who had invited Jesus to his home was offended that Jesus didn't stop her. Jesus uses the incident to teach a lesson about forgiveness and love and declares to Simon: ***Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.***" (Luke 7:47 - ESV) To put that in a different way, Jesus said that there was proof and assurance for this woman that her sins were forgiven. The proof was in her love.

Everything that we do because of the life that is ours in Christ can be part of our firstfruit giving to God. Why bother coming to church each Sunday morning? We come together in worship to be fed on the life-giving Word of God and to find the assurance of that word for our lives in the midst of the devil's temptations. But the fact that we are here is also proof of God's grace at work in us. It is the assurance of what Paul said in our Epistle lesson: ***"Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame."*** (Romans 10:11, ESV)

Why bother getting up in the morning with a prayer on our lips? We do it because it declares not only our need for God's grace, but the assurance of the Lord who has blessed us and hears us. Why bother going to Holy Communion? As we partake of the true body and blood of our Saviour, we have the forgiveness that Christ has won for us through His death. The very fact that this table is set before us shows that Christ has done what He promised to do, as He dies and rises for us. That is why Paul says ***For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*** (1 Corinthians 11:26 - ESV)

Why bother with any of the things we do in the name of the Lord? When we love and honour our spouse, it acknowledges the grace of the Lord who has first brought us together and made the two into one. When we honour our parents—or when parents love and care for their children, it acknowledges the grace of the Lord who has made us a family and blesses us in His love. When we resist the devil's temptations, we acknowledge again the firstfruit of faith—the faith in that Saviour ***who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.*** (Hebrews 4:15 - ESV) We show the victory that Christ has won for us.

The life we live in Christ is proof of the life we have through Christ. Jesus died and rose again. That is fact. He did this for us, and that is salvation. As we live what we believe, bringing the firstfruits that flow from the heart filled with the Holy Spirit,

we declare something wonderful: that God has been faithful and we have been richly blessed through Him. Amen.