

“First Fruits: Taking the Big Risk”

Deuteronomy 26:1-3

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So much of the life of faith defies what is reasonable, logical, or even sensible. I truly understand why many people take a close look at Christianity and decide to look elsewhere. On the surface, it doesn't make a lot of sense. 'Love your enemy' is an instant stumbling block. 'Forgive your brother or your sister seventy times seven times' makes a modern seeker wonder if this religion is worth pursuing. And the whole idea that a fish sandwich, blessed and shared, could feed five thousand people is outrageous to a mind shaped by the disciplines of logic and statistical analysis.

So, the task of preaching about faith already has two strikes against it. I am remembering words of the great Black preacher, Otis Moss, Jr. who, in speaking to a class of seminary students, once pled with them, 'If you think you could be happy doing some other profession, something other than preaching about faith, DO THAT OTHER THING!' He seemed to know that faith and reason are the strangest of bed fellows.

Indeed, I have found that Christianity is not for the feint of heart, but for the risk taker; not for the one limited by what the mind can grasp, but for the one open to what the soul can imagine.

The teaching on the first fruits can only be understood through the eyes of faith. It is an invitation to live by faith in a God who promises to provide. Lodged in the Book of Deuteronomy, deep in the Law of Moses, it is among the most ancient of all the wisdom teachings. And, like so much of the Biblical wisdom, the teaching on the first fruits requires taking a risk.

My son, Sam, the economist, assures me the idea of first fruits is not found in any of the scholarly Economics journals.

It is not in the modern textbooks on apple growing or in any of the agri-business libraries. The wisdom of the first fruits is found only in the Bible.

Though the teaching in Deuteronomy is set in the agricultural context of that day when everyone had a hand in farming, the principle of the first fruits applies in every economic context. Whether you are starting up a John Deere tractor or booting up an IBM computer or loading up a nail apron or opening up a paint can or asking your patient to open up wide and say, 'Ahh'; the wisdom teaching on the first fruits applies across the board.

In a nutshell, here's what it's all about. God asks us not to wait until the whole harvest is in before we make our thank offering. Instead of waiting to see whether the harvest is 100 bushels or 1000 bushels or 10,000 bushels, God says in effect, 'I want you to take a risk. It's a risk that will pay off in ways you can not possibly imagine.' God says in effect, 'I am inviting you to trust me on this. I want you take a leap of faith. I want you to take some of the very first grain you harvest, not knowing whether the later grain will be rotten or ripe, not knowing whether the later grain will be hailed out or gathered in; not knowing whether the later grain will be trampled by a herd of elephants or safely tucked away in the silo; not knowing the full extent of the harvest; take some of the very first fruits and present that in the temple as a thank offering **and you will be astounded by the harvest that follows.**'

This is the essence of the teaching on first fruits. Don't hold back, waiting to see if there are any leftovers to give to God; go ahead and make your gift from the very first fruits of your labor.

Some call that idiotic. Some call it bizarre. Some call it irresponsible. I prefer to call it faithful.

I will leave the translation up to each of you. If you are retired and living on a pension, you figure out what it means to give from the first fruits. If you are a millionaire living off the interest of an inherited fortune, you figure out what it means to give from the first fruits. If you are scraping by with coupons and food stamps and visits to the food pantries, you figure out what it means for you to give from the first of the fruits. If you are a teacher, a lawyer, a doctor, a full-time parent, a student, a realtor, a mechanic, a veterinarian, a nurse, a waitress, a librarian, a builder, a roofer, a sales clerk, a manager, a professional athlete; I leave it up to each of you to translate the wisdom of first fruits into your own particular economy.

In other words, when it comes to your money, I invite you to manage it as you do the rest of your life...with an eye on faith. This invitation I offer the church today, in the greatest of hope!
Amen!