

First Steps

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

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I have chosen to speak this morning from the Deuteronomy text regarding first fruits. At a glance, these words appear to be a guide to faithful stewardship. Certainly, they are that...and more!

In a sense, the teaching here is very simple. It is this: as you are bringing your gift to the altar of God, pause to reflect over your family's history, see how it is that God has blessed your family for many generations, and then present your gift as an expression of thanksgiving for all the times God has been your rock, your redeemer, your healer, your provider, your comforter. Whatever the gift, let it be a sign of gratitude.

Whenever I am asked by stewardship committees to advise them on how to establish a theme or how to convince people to give money to the church, I look no further than Deuteronomy 26! Moses has already written the book on this subject! No need to re-invent the wheel! Like David Letterman, Moses has set out the ten most important reasons for giving, and the thing is, they are all the same! It is gratitude for God's grace in our lives that moves us to surrender the first fruits of our vineyards.

When Moses first gave this teaching, he was thinking back over a generation or two, back to a time when his family lived under the oppressive hand of the Pharaoh! What he remembers is that God led his family from oppression to liberation, from darkness to light, from imprisonment to freedom, from a land of discouragement to a land of promise. He remembers the Red Sea crossing and the manna in the wilderness and the water from the rock and the covey of quail.

He remembers God's place in his family's journey, and he is overcome with gratitude. This is what he has on his mind as he approaches the altar.

Now, over this past week, thirty-one of us traveled to the Gulfport, Mississippi area on a mission trip. We saw the devastation. We saw the concrete slabs where houses once stood. We saw thousands of oaks and pines snapped in two like kitchen match sticks. We saw roofs caved in, fences blown down, bridges collapsed, and automobiles in bayou graveyards. We saw the trees where Matthew O'Brien and his family held on for dear life as a wave of water 38 feet high washed away their sense of well-being. We saw a house sitting in a gas station, a boat in a ball field, and an Alpha Romeo sports car sitting in a front lawn, now a yard ornament instead of a means of transportation. We saw a lot of brokenness.

But way more than the brokenness, what we saw and what we felt and what we experienced was a wave of gratitude, a wave more than 38 feet high. Amidst the tears of loss, we witnessed the attitude of gratitude. Side by side with the desperation, we witnessed the gratitude. Next door to the despair, we saw the gratitude. We were expecting the devastation; we were caught off-guard by the gratitude people expressed for God's being with them in the darkest days, for volunteers arriving even a year and a half after Katrina had left her mark, gratitude for any and every sign of life.

Just outside the Presbyterian Church social hall door, there was a camellia shrub. Every leaf and every flower had been stripped bare. Its bark looked like it had been through a shredding machine. It stood there drooping like our old clothes line in the back yard except for one blossom taking a risk at opening its fragile beauty to the world. That lone blossom became a symbol of the endurance that is possible when gratitude survives.

As we labored outside Miss Laurie Ellen's double wide trailer, sorting out the family antiques from the common rubble, the lady of the house announced she needed to step inside to take it easy for awhile. Her head was starting to spin again. I called out to her in my best pastoral voice, "Be still and know...." And before I could complete the verse from the psalm, Miss Laurie Ellen chimed in, "and know that I am God. Be still, and know that I am God."

If one needed a mantra in the midst of a hurricane, this would be it: "Be still and know that I am God."

During the week, one of our more talented volunteers installed a counter top and sink in Miss Laurie Ellen's kitchen. Imagine that! Running water in the kitchen sink after 18 months of hauling water from someplace else! When we stopped by at the end of the week to say farewell, she expressed her gratitude by telling us she had been up at 2:00 a.m. washing her dishes, simply because, finally, she could! It was easy to point out this fragile woman's limitations; but it was transforming to witness her gratitude. If Bruce ever gets around to doing a Life Map, Miss Laurie Ellen's kitchen sink will be on it!

I suppose it could be argued that churches need money to keep the doors open, to pay the bills, to employ the staff. But what Moses sees is that all that's really needed is gratitude. When there's gratitude for the evidence of God's grace, the money issues take care of themselves. Where there is no evidence of gratitude, no amount of money will make a church congregation thrive.

On our very first evening in Mississippi, we were welcomed by George and Linda, the overall directors of the Presbyterian Disaster Relief effort. They thanked us for coming to replace a roof and to remove dangerous trees and to paint a fence and to install flooring and to build a solid gate; but they then implored us to take time out to listen to the stories of the home owners.

He reminded us that healing comes at many levels. There is the healing of the property, but there is the healing of the heart. There is the mending of the fences, but there is the mending of the soul.

This spiritual healing comes when a Connecticut Yankee sits and listens, as long as it takes, to a Mississippi man whose home has been in the same Ladner family for six generations, to tell his account of how Katrina changed everything.

Each night, after supper, we formed a circle and we shared our impressions of the day. One after another, we told what we had heard; we retold the stories that had been poured out to us over a turkey sandwich and an Oreo cookie. From a pastor's point of view, this is where the lasting ministry happened, in the listening to the stories of the human spirit and of the divine providence. We heard Frances tell of a litter of kittens abandoned outside her front gate and how she and George rescued them, opening their home to those creatures as if they were the descendants of royalty. I tell you the Queen of England has not received better hospitality than did that litter of abandoned kittens! We heard Matthew describe what it was like to be in his home with his wife and children when the house literally filled up with water. He said he guessed it was like being inside a washing machine during the rinse cycle! I suspect he has told that story 100 times, and he will tell it 100 more times before the wound closes on his heart and the fear subsides. But those from South Church, who listened well this week, have contributed to his healing.

As we boarded our flight on Delta Airlines in Mobile, bound for our connecting flight in Atlanta, we were filled with a mix of emotions: satisfaction for much work completed, frustration for FEMA's short-sightedness, agitation with certain insurance companies, sadness at all that has been lost; but way more than all of that is the emotion of gratitude.

That's what filled our luggage and our carry-on bags. That's what filled our hearts and our minds.

We are all just so grateful for our paths intersecting the paths of strangers for seven days, for in those seven days we saw that God had once again parted the waters of the Red Sea, that God had once again provided the manna in the wilderness, that God had once again led a people from utter despair to the promise of hope.

Since the annual meeting of our church in January, we have been printing our stewardship statistics in the Sunday bulletin. We have listed the number of pledges and the amount of money pledged and the gap between that amount and the budgeted amount. We are not going to do that anymore. From now on, what I'd like to see instead is a weekly paragraph announcing somebody's gratitude. For it is gratitude to God that builds a church.

My favorite story from the Hasidic Jewish tradition is the story of the man who raised a son and a daughter on the family farm. When he died, the land was divided equally. The son headed off to the east to till the ground and plant the seed. The daughter headed west to do the same. When the harvest time came, the son looked upon his ripened grain, felt gratitude to God welling up in his bones, and remembered his sister from whom he had not heard a word. He loaded up a wagon of grain and headed in her direction. Meanwhile, the daughter reaped an abundant harvest, and filled with thanksgiving to God, she remembered her brother and wondered what had become of him. Filling her wagon with the fruit of her field, she headed in his direction. Coming around the mountain, they both saw and recognized the other! They ran to greet one another and to offer their thank offerings. And in that valley they embraced. That is where they built the temple. And that is still where churches are built, where people of faith embrace each other in gratitude.

This is why I never worry much about money for the church's ministry. I look around and what I see is a grateful people. From Moses to Miss Laurie Ellen, what we have is a powerful testimony to what can be when gratitude is allowed to govern the human heart. In the greatest of hope, Amen!