

"What belongs to whom?" A sermon by Lee Ireland  
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church  
March 10, 2019, First Sunday in Lent  
Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Let us pray together: Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.

We don't often have a reading from Deuteronomy in our three-year cycle of Bible readings. So let me fill in a bit of background about this book from the Old Testament, or the Hebrew Bible as some call it. Deuteronomy records Moses' words to the Hebrew people before they entered the land that God had promised to their ancestors. You may remember that Moses had led the people through the wilderness for 40 years following God's direction. Moses' words chronicled in Deuteronomy are speeches that Moses gave to the people at the end of his life. The speeches cover three areas: the covenant God had established with the Israelites, the laws of the covenant and the necessity of the people to obey those laws as a condition for enjoying the benefits of the covenant.

Today's reading covers this third aspect – the necessity of the people to obey those laws and conditions for enjoying the benefits of the covenant.

What's interesting about today's reading is that a liturgy for presenting the people's 'first fruits' offerings to God is provided. The 'first fruits' offerings were given to the Levites, the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows. Imagine worshipping Israelites standing in their worship space (the Temple wasn't built yet) holding their baskets of fruit and grains – the abundance of their harvest. The priest received the basket and placed them on the altar. The Israelites would say to the priest. – Let's read it together. It's on the screen:

**"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. 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 labor 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."**

After the Israelites presented their offering to God the worship continued. Reading on beginning at verse 12 the Israelites would say: **"I have removed the sacred portion from the house, and I have given it to the Levites, the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows, in accordance with your entire commandment that you commanded me. Look down from your holy habitation, from heaven, and bless your people Israel and the ground that you have given us, as you swore to our ancestors—a land flowing with milk and honey."**

What is it that strikes you about these words? Any comments? (wait for response) The first thing I notice was that the Israelites say: "So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me." In this liturgy, the Israelites repeat their history of being slaves in Egypt, their cry to God for help and the fact that God brought them out of slavery to freedom. Then they say that God gave them a land flowing with milk and honey – their promised land. Note who they say gave them the land. The land was a gift from God. They were slaves and powerless when God saved them and gave them a gift of a homeland.

These words don't say that they worked hard for the land and the land belonged to them. No, the Israelites believed that the land belonged to God and all the bounty that comes from the land is to be shared with everyone in the country. The Israelites believed that they would not have land and a harvest without the

blessings of God. They believed that God had given them everything they needed to succeed. All that they have is a gift from God.

How many of your friends believe that all they have is a gift from God? In the USA, the land of self-made individuals who believe that they are responsible for their success – why saying that God has enabled them to succeed is almost downright un-American!

Back to the scripture. Did you notice who the offering was then to be passed on to? The Levites, the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows. The Levites were the priests who received no land because they were to be free of farming so they could take care of the Temple and the sacrifices. Since they received no land the people were to take care of them. The resident aliens were non-Jews who lived in the land. Some people would say the resident aliens of our day are the undocumented individuals in our country. Most orphans and widows had no support since they had no male to take care of them. The resident aliens, the widows and orphans, who were to receive the offering were the least of these. Through Moses, God gave the Israelites a law that they were to share the bounty – the bounty that came from God in the first place.

The Israelites celebrated the bounty of the harvest, but they were also celebrating the faithfulness of God which is the source of the bounty. They were thankful that God had taken them from slavery to freedom and blessed them with the land that enabled them to prosper. They didn't claim that what they had received belonged to them as individuals. What they had was to be shared with the community.

Of course, most of us do not raise crops enabling us to bring our harvest to church to dedicate to God. Growing up I heard many stories about rural families taking care of others in their community including the pastor. One pastor I know said that they lived on the generosity of the members of the church. When a member slaughtered a steer, they had meat. When the tomatoes ripened, they had fresh vegetables.

Since we don't farm for a living, how can we offer our 'first fruits' to God? How can we celebrate the faithfulness of God in our lives? How can we use our bounty for the good of the whole community as the Israelites were commanded to do?

Obviously, the answer to those questions is founded in the belief that one accepts as true that everything we have is a blessing from God. Not everyone in today's world would agree with that. But as a Christ-follower, we know that we are to love God and our neighbor as ourselves. We are to take as good a care of our neighbor as we take care of ourselves.

This church amazes me with how, for its size, it takes care of our neighbors. Last Sunday we packed 122 food bags for food-deficient families of Cathedral City high school students. We assemble and distribute blessing bags for the homeless. We have even housed a once homeless person. We contribute to Esther and Noah's mission work in Egypt. Over the past 10 years we have done so much more when we had the resources in people and money to bless, and I quote from the scripture I read earlier, to bless **the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in accordance with the entire commandment that you, God, has commanded me.**

There's so much more that can be done. Obviously, we need more bodies to do the work. We also need more money to keep the programs going and this church viable.

Listen now as Kevin explains Vision 2020, the plan to move forward and address the issues that we face at Community Presbyterian Church Cathedral City. Please listen closely to him and consider how you can become involved with reaching out to our community and, like the Israelites, share the blessings God has given to you and to me – to all of us.