



## FIRST FRUITS

February 14, 2016, First Sunday in Lent

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Adam D. Gorman, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

---

*Dear God, open our eyes that we may see. Open our minds that we may know. Remind us, God, that all we have is yours, and open our hearts that we may offer it all back to you. In your wonderful Son, Jesus Christ's name, we pray. Amen.*

First fruits, last fruits and all those in between. That's what we are called to thank God for by giving them all back to God. During the time that Deuteronomy was written, the people lived in a herding and farming culture, and they lived and died depending on their crops. So those crops are the “gifts” – or perhaps resources – people received from God and were then able to give back to God.

In the text that Margaret just read for us, we are told, “*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 take it to the church as an offering.

The first fruits were and are the most needed and most desired part of the crop. They were the long-awaited signs of life and of food. They were the first things that could be exchanged for other foods, goods and necessities. But they were and are to be given back to God instead; patiently, humbly and thankfully. Then we, together with the rest of our community, including the strangers among us, are to celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord our God has given us.

Prior to this passage, we are also told, “When [we] reap [our] harvest in [our] field and forget a sheaf in the field, [we] should not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord [our] God may bless [us] in



all [our] undertakings. When [we] beat [our] olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. When [we] gather grapes in [our] vineyard, etc. etc...”

So here we see that we are not only to give of our first fruits but also to give from our last fruits. To not scrape together all that we have been blessed with and hoard it all for ourselves. But rather to offer it all back to God by giving it to the alien, the orphan, and the widow. We are to give in appreciation to God for all that God has blessed us with.

The point is this, the people lived and died depending on their crops and yet they were called to offer these blessings back to God through the church as well as to strangers, foreigners, orphans and widows. And so we, too, are called to offer all that we have been blessed with to God, and to the others. However, since most of us here don't have fields to glean from, for our families to live off of, and for us to leave food for the poor in, how might this be applicable to us here today?

Two examples of first fruits are that we could all distribute a portion of the money we receive in our paychecks directly to the church. Or we could all make pledges to the church, or rather TO GOD, promising to give of our first fruits in the year to come. These would both be true examples of offering our first fruits to God.

Other examples of giving of our first fruits are, if every time we shopped for ourselves we bought something to be donated. So if, for example, we were buying a sweater for ourselves we could buy some pairs of socks and donate them through the church. Or if we were buying a scarf as a gift for a friend we could buy a second one and give it to someone freezing out on the streets today. Those could both be examples of a first fruit.

An example of a last fruit, a leaving behind of our gleanings from the field, could be a 40-Day Lent Devotion. Every day for the remainder of Lent we could all remove one thing from our closets and put it in a bag. Then, on Easter, we could take all those things we have collected and give them to the nearest shelter. Or if



we receive a bonus at the end of the year, give ten percent of it back to the church.

These are some thoughts to get our imaginations thinking of some ways we can give of our first fruits and of our last fruits.

Time and again Scripture tells us to give out of our poverty, not out of our wealth. Well, what does that mean? When we give out of our wealth, we give based on what we believe is generosity to God. As my high school Sunday School teacher taught me, when we give out of our wealth, “we are being magnanimous and offering our blessing to God. It’s almost as if we believe we are greater, giving to God who is lesser.”

But, when we give out of our poverty, we acknowledge that God is greater and our gift is a sacrifice to acknowledge all that God has done for us.

It’s about attitude. We offer to God what we think is ours or we offer to God what we know is His. We think we are doing God a favor versus acknowledging the favors that God has done for us. In Deuteronomy, we are reminded to give what we have to God because it was all His to begin with. How many of us can say we do that?

Giving from our first fruits back to God shouldn’t be an optional exercise, but for many it is. Giving our money back to God shouldn’t be done with a grudging heart, but for many it is. We give back to God what *we* think we can afford, based on what we think He deserves from us. But when we give generously, acknowledging that it all came from Him to begin with, we are told that God will bless us in all of our work and in everything we do.

Here are questions for all of us to ask ourselves. When we give, do we look in our cabinets, check the dates of things that are about to expire and then give those cans and boxes of food to the New York Common Pantry? Or do we take our paycheck and go straight to the supermarket, purchase a whole bunch of fresh and choice food, and then feed people with it? The way I read it is that Deuteronomy tells us



we should be doing BOTH.

The following story strikes a chord with me because it is about a teacher and a student. As you listen to this story I want you to try and hear it from the heart of the child, not the teacher.

“There was a teacher named Jean Thompson, who stood in front of her fifth-grade class on the first day of the school year, and told the children a lie. Like most teachers, she looked at her pupils and said she loved them equally and that she would treat them all alike. But that was impossible, because there in front of her, slumped in his seat, in the third row, was a little boy named Teddy Stoddard.

You see, Mrs. Thompson had watched Teddy the year before and had noticed that he didn't play well with the other children, that his clothes were unkempt, and that he was constantly in need of a bath. Frankly, she thought Teddy was unpleasant to be around.

It got to the point during the first few months that she would actually take delight in marking his papers with a broad red pen. Making bold X's and then marking the F at the top of the paper biggest of all. Because Teddy was a sullen little boy, no one else seemed to enjoy him, either.

At the school where Mrs. Thompson taught, she was required to review each child's records and she put Teddy's off until last. When she opened his file, she was in for a surprise. His first-grade teacher had written, 'Teddy is a bright, inquisitive child with a ready laugh.' 'He does his work neatly and has good manners... he is a joy to be around.'

His second-grade teacher wrote, 'Teddy is an excellent student well-liked by his classmates, but he is troubled because his mother has a terminal illness and life at home must be a struggle.'



And his third-grade teacher had written, ‘Teddy continues to work hard but his mother’s death has been hard on him. He tries to do his best but his father doesn’t show much interest and his home life will soon affect him if some steps aren’t taken.’

Teddy’s fourth-grade teacher wrote, ‘Teddy is withdrawn and doesn’t show much interest in school. He doesn’t have many friends and sometimes sleeps in class. He is tardy and could become a problem.’

By now Mrs. Thompson realized the problem, but Christmas was coming fast. It was all she could do, with the school play and all, until the day before the holidays began, and she was suddenly forced to focus on Teddy Stoddard.

Her children brought her presents, all in beautiful ribbon and bright paper. Except for Teddy’s, which was clumsily wrapped in the heavy, brown paper of a grocery bag. Mrs. Thompson took pains to open it in the middle of the other presents.

Some of the children started to laugh when she found a rhinestone bracelet with some of the stones missing, and a bottle that was one-quarter full of cologne. She stifled the children’s laughter when she exclaimed how pretty the bracelet was, putting it on, and dabbing some of the perfume behind the other wrist. Teddy Stoddard stayed behind just long enough to say, ‘Mrs. Thompson, today you smelled just like my mom used to.’

After the children left she cried for at least an hour. On that very day, she quit teaching reading, writing, and speaking. Instead, she began to teach children. Jean Thompson paid particular attention to the one they all called ‘Teddy.’

As she worked with him, his mind seemed to come alive. The more she encouraged him, the faster he responded. On days where there would be an



important test, Mrs. Thompson would remember that perfume. By the end of the year he had become one of the smartest children in the class and... well, he had also become the ‘pet’ of the teacher who had once vowed to love all of her children exactly the same.

A year later she found a note under her door, from Teddy, telling her that of all the teachers he’d had in elementary school, she was his favorite. Six years went by before she got another note from Teddy.

He then wrote that he had finished high school, third in his class, and she was still his favorite teacher of all time.

Four years after that, she got another letter, saying that while things had been tough at times, he’d stayed in school, had stuck with it, and would graduate from college with the highest of honors. He assured Mrs. Thompson she was still his favorite teacher.

Then four more years passed and yet another letter came. This time he explained that after he got his bachelor’s degree, he decided to go a little further. The letter explained that she was still his favorite teacher, but that now his name was a little longer. The letter was signed, Theodore F. Stoddard, M.D.

The story doesn’t end there. You see, there was yet another letter that spring. Teddy said he’d met this girl and was to be married. He explained that his father had died a couple of years ago and he was wondering... well, if Mrs. Thompson might agree to sit in the pew usually reserved for the mother of the groom. And guess what, she wore that bracelet, the one with several rhinestones missing. And I bet on that special day, Jean Thompson smelled just like... well, just like the way Teddy remembered his mother smelling on their last Christmas together.”



We can choose to hear this story from two different vantage points. We can hear it from the side of the teacher and recognize that to teach children instead of just teaching reading, writing and speaking, is a gift of our first fruits. And from that angle we could see that we are called to give of ourselves out of patience not impatience, to be observant and to go the extra mile.

Or we can see this story from the eyes of little Teddy as he grows up. Each time he sent his teacher a letter he was giving an offering to his beloved teacher. He was remembering who had given him the gift of happiness, who had looked after him, who had paid attention to him, who had listened to him and who had helped him in his time of need. He remembered what she had done for him and so he sent her a letter. A letter of thanks.

Teddy gave out of his poverty, not out of his wealth. He gave her a broken rhinestone bracelet and a near empty bottle of perfume. But you know what, that's all he had. Then as he grew older and wiser, and as he began to grow up and do better in school and in life, he let his teacher know that he owed it all to her by sending her a letter of thanksgiving.

Remember this story when we give our tithes and our offerings to God. Give out of our abundance in a way that truly says thank you to the God who gave it to us in the first place. To say thank you to the God who created us and sustains us, who knows us before we were even in the womb, and who is with us in our baptism, as well as with us through the entire rest of the journey of our lives.

We have all been blessed in so many different ways. We were blessed to be able to wake up this morning, we are blessed that we were able to put one foot in front of the other, and that we were all able to come here and be gathered together on this frigid day. Let's remember where that all came from. Let's remember God by sharing of our first fruits, our last fruits and all those in between. That's what we are called to do, to thank God by giving it all back to God.

*In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, amen.*