

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, ² 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 go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. ³ You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, "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." ⁴ When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, ⁵ you shall make this response before the LORD your God: "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. ⁶ When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, ⁷ we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. ⁸ 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; ⁹ and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. ¹⁰ So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me." You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. ¹¹ Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.

“Firstfruits and Remembering”

As started to prepare the sermon this week my first thought about this passage from Deuteronomy was what we do when we receive the paycheck. Myself, when Russ puts the check in my hand the last Sunday of the month I will say thanks to Russ. My next immediate thought is put the check in the wallet not the shirt pocket. Checks don't launder well. I think of what needs to be paid for the month. I'm reminded of debt. The thoughts that typically go through my head are not coming before the Lord and in gratitude acknowledging where he has brought me and all that he has done for me. It takes a bigger event than a paycheck to get me going in that direction. The first few miles after I crossed the border into Canada to finally begin ministering here at Claude were a bit teary for that reason. The first few miles after I crossed the border a year ago December for the first time as a permanent resident in Canada was also quite teary. There have been many such moments of gratitude after having met and married Dana and now that a baby is on the way. I am grateful to be where I am and doing what doing and most of all for the new home God has given me. Yet, I'm not quite sure what to offer up as firstfruits. More on this later.

I stand here in a wonderful land. God has entrusted me with the best wife a man could have, a baby on the way, a perfect dog, an oddity of a cat, a comfortable and happy home. God has wonderfully provided family and friends to stand in for those I left behind...and especially a church family for the one I left behind in West Virginia was utterly dear to me. God has been extremely loving

and steadfastly faithful to me. It didn't happen overnight, but in time God has brought me to and settled me in a wonderful land; me, the youngest child in my family, the children of the children of sharecroppers in the valley of Virginia; me, the child of divorce who had to go through it himself to heal. What first fruit can I bring?

God told the Israelites simply to fill a basketful of the firstfruits of their harvest from the land and come and give it to the priest who would set it before the Lord and then they were supposed to recount who they were and where they had come from. They were the children of wandering nomads who wound up in slavery and God delivered them and brought them to Beulah land. It was very easy for them to fill a basket with the first and best grain or vegetables of the harvest and go and remember. How do I do this with my life? What can I put in the basket...take a bit of bit of my check and tithe or volunteer a little more time? Well, this section isn't about tithing. The next few verses in Deuteronomy cover that. It's just not about the usual code words for stewardship; time, talent, and treasure. What can I offer as firstfruits? When the baby is born should I offer that up? (Yeah, sick joke) What little bit of the best of what this land has produced for me, this wonderful land that God has brought me too...what little bit can I offer up? I'm at a loss.

Well, maybe I've just grown prone to looking at this all wrong. This just seems to be so much about me and my life. Maybe the land for us Christians isn't as materialistic and individualistic as I'm making it out to be. Maybe the land that we need to talk about isn't that God has been kind enough to lead us into the good life. Rather, the land for us in Christ is what God has done and is doing for us right here at Claude. I'm speaking of new life in Christ...of fellowship in the Holy Spirit...loving community in the image of Christ, indeed, the image of God. Certainly God has blessed us all with the good life, indeed excessively so and we indeed should be thankful. But, the “Land” to which God has brought us is himself as he rests in this body of believers. God has delivered us each. We were and are still slaves to sin, but God given us a new in which to dwell...his very self...a land in which we are loved and supported not only by God, but by a warm community of friends who are family, who have promised to love one another and help one another through thick and thin to grow in Christ. This land doesn't just flow with milk and honey. It flows with the love of God poured into each of us by the Holy Spirit. This land is called grace and it is a foretaste, an anticipation of the way humanity will be in the new creation. We need to take our minds off of the old life, the good life with which God has blessed, and thinking what little part of my life can I offer more of to God in gratitude. Rather, we must look at this communion of disciples to which God has brought us each and ask how much more we can risk loving and being loved in the midst of this fellowship. Because this truly is a wonderful “Land” to which God has brought us.

Well, looking at it that way we still must ask what firstfruits we can offer up to God in gratitude for such love as this in which we stand? What shall we put in our little baskets? The psalmist said it best I think. “What shall I return to the Lord for all this goodness to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord. I will offer all I have promised to the Lord in the presence of all

the people. Praise the Lord!” (Ps. 116:12-14). Christ himself is our firstfruit. We shall lift him up. Let us gather around his table here and lift up the cup of salvation. This bread and this wine taken from the fruit of the ground to be a sign of Jesus’ body given and his blood shed for the forgiveness of our sins and our reconciliation to God. This is our firstfruit. Friends let us come to this table as freed slaves and lift up Christ in gratitude for this wonderful land in which he has settled us and let us do so remembering who we are and from where we have come. Amen.