

Last week, we read from 2 Corinthians, "The one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully." and today we hear God's instruction for the Hebrew people on what to do with their yield. At Harvest time, like the fall, God's people are to bring their first fruits and share. Rightly so, this scripture from Deuteronomy is a Thanksgiving text. With that in mind, listen for the word of the Lord.

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

26When 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, ²you 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. ³You 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." ⁴When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, ⁵you 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. ⁶When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, ⁷we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. ⁸The 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; ⁹and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. ¹⁰So 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. ¹¹Then 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.

Giving the first fruits of the harvest is about a trust that more will follow, and we can trust God to provide.

At our Offering today, we will bring our Pledges as an act of worship and commitment, just as people of God have done with thanksgiving to God, for all God gives to us. We give God our best and give to God first. (Not me first, or America first, but God first.) When Chuck and I get paid the first check that gets written is to the church. Our first fruits. And we have learned to live on the left-overs. Giving our

first fruits is an act of putting God first in our lives. While it was a requirement of the Hebrew people, for us it is an act of joyful obedience to the God who first loved us and gave to us.

So today we consider what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Turning to the gospel now, we read from Chapter 6. Prior to our reading today, Jesus has turned 5 loaves and 2 fish into food for 5000 people. So with that in mind, listen.

John 6:24-35

²⁴So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus. ²⁵When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" ²⁶Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. ²⁷Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal."

²⁸Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?" ²⁹Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." ³⁰So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?" ³¹Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" ³²Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." ³⁴They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." ³⁵Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

Proclamation of the Word

"Feed them, and they will come." has been the mantra of the church for hundreds of years. And it all starts here with Jesus.

So much of life takes place around meals.

Our son Avery is a student and an intern this semester in Washington, DC.

We laugh because he has almost figured out how to get a free meal a day to help his food budget.

A Lunch and Learn here, a Scouting gala in the evening, the Thursday breakfast where the interns dish out shrimp and grits and bacon.

People know that to get folks to show up, you must serve food.

Jesus has just had the world's biggest picnic starting with a few loaves and fishes.

Word has gotten around.

When they chase Jesus down across the Sea of Galilee, Jesus says, "I know why you are here." in verse 26. "It's not the signs and miracles you have seen- you're looking for another free lunch. But that is nothing compared to the bread from heaven standing before you."

But most people are just looking for lunch, Jesus knows.

We do that, too.

We look for all kinds of ways to fill our hungers and thirsts.

Of all the gods we worship to fill us up- none have the lasting effect of the one true G-d.

Of all the gods and idols we make, they will pass away.

We cannot binge enough: on food, Saturday football, or Netflix,
or work hard enough,
or own enough to fulfill our deepest hungers.

Two Saturdays ago we were swamped by a crowd of hundreds of thousands on the streets of DC.

It was right after the Washington Nationals surprisingly won a World Series.

Baseball was one thing they could all agree on in DC. It was unifying.

We really didn't have a dog in that fight,

but it was fun for Avery to follow as a short-term local.

As we all cheered, people of all stripes and colors,

and sang choruses of "Baby Shark," I wondered,

"What if God got this kind of parade, this kind of devotion...actually that kind of worship?"

It felt like worship, like Deuteronomy- bowing down, bringing our whole selves, our thanks, except we were not praising God. Listen again,

¹⁰So 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. ¹¹Then 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.

Under Moses' leadership the people were wandering around the wilderness, too.

Their ancestor Jacob has been a "wandering Aramean"-

which is just a nice way of saying a homeless refugee, an alien.

God's people were totally dependent on the grace of God and hospitality of others.

Once freed from slavery, they wander in the wilderness for forty more years.

The Hebrew people were always wandering.

In the gospel today, Jesus reminds them that the manna they received by God's grace was only the foretaste of that which was coming.

The manna was just first fruits of a promise to come- a pledge.

The manna was appetizer, not main course.
And here is the main course right in front of them- live and in person.

The larger plan of God is bigger than the here and now.
It is an eternal plan.

The folks who supped on manna are no more,
just like all those looking for lunch at a hillside picnic are no more.
Jesus could keep providing a picnic or Saturday tailgates, but that was not the point.

Jesus keeps the big picture in mind.
He is connecting the dots for these folks.
The great I AM that Moses met at the burning bush and I are the same.
I AM the bread of life.

Sprinkled in with his talk of being the bread of life,
Jesus keeps talking about raising people up on the third day.
This is not Wonder bread or a fountain of youth,
Jesus is pointing them and us to a very real NEW CREATION-
life abundant, like a flourishing tree for all living things.

Jesus, in fact, puts it different ways to help us see that God is the source of all life.
God sends Jesus as the real revelation of God.

1. "I am the bread of life." (John 6:35, 41, 48, 51)
2. "I am the light of the world." (John 8:12)
3. "I am the door of the sheep." (John 10:7,9)
4. "I am the resurrection and the life." (John 11:25)
5. "I am the good shepherd." (John 10:11, 14)
6. "I am the way, the truth, and the life." (John 14:6).
7. "I am the true vine." (John 15:1, 5)

He starts with bread of life to remind us that the most basic human need is food, sustenance. Just as our most basic need is a relationship with God.

Do you believe that?

David Lose writes, "...the thing is, just as with Jesus' words to the crowd, such a promise is as frightening as it is comforting, for such a promise raises hopes and expectations to dizzying heights.

And so (St.) John reports that the people naturally ask, “what miracle will you perform so that we may see it and believe you?”

In other words, “Prove yourself, Jesus.”

And my, but doesn’t that sound familiar, for how much easier faith would be if God would just do what God’s supposed to do and give us a miracle.

But God, you see, our God rarely does what God is supposed to do.

For our God is a God of surprises, of upheavals, of reversals.

And so rather than do what God is supposed to do, God does the unexpected:

instead of pronouncing judgment in the face of our sin and selfishness, God offers mercy;

instead of justice, love;

instead of condemnation, forgiveness;

instead of coming in power, God came in weakness;

and instead of giving us a miracle, God gives us God’s own self.

...Martin Luther would remind us, the whole of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection are summed up both succinctly and eloquently in the two words we hear when coming to the (Communion) Table: “for you.”

This is Christ’s body, given for you. This is Christ’s blood, shed for you.”ⁱ

For you- are there no more convincing words?

Except that if you have been a parent, you know how much you do for the kids you love. And they probably never really get it, how much you love them and do everything for their benefit and well-being.

We never really can grasp the depth of God's love either.

Many of us just ignore it until life gets our attention-----maybe.

God had tried different approaches.

As one of our group commented on the scriptures, in the Old Testament the people of God are given clear instructions about what to do and how to do it.

When the people come to Jesus they are asking for what they need to do.

They ask, “What must we do to perform the works of God?”

Jesus answered them,

“This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”

They are looking for steps to follow, and instead they get a person.

They are looking for a recipe, and they are offered a RELATIONSHIP.

Whatever your hunger, whatever your thirst, we can never get enough to fill up.
We are not the source of life.
God is.
It is a gift. All of life is gift.

We can choose our response to God's love,
but there is nothing we can do, friends, to earn God's saving grace.
God has done all that needs to be done, to scale the divide between heaven and earth, between God
and humanity.

Salvation was accomplished on a cross.
When that crowd was looking for Jesus to prove it, that he was God's Son,
he humbly submitted, knowing that no sign would show them,
like the suffering of his love
or the power of his resurrection so that we might have life
real life- abundant life.

Jesus came FOR YOU, for me, to show in full view
what God's trustworthy sustaining love looks like.

Its all grace.

Even the believing- a grace.

He was sent and is given FOR YOU, FOR ME, FOR THE WORLD.

Can you believe it?

Prayer: Lord, we believe. Help our unbelief. Amen.

ⁱ David Lose, *Pentecost 10B, The Surprise of our Lives*, July 15, 2015,
<http://www.davidlose.net/2015/07/pentecost-10-b-the-surprise-of-our-lives/>