

Ritual Giving
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
November 10, 2019-AM Service
Rev. Peter Jonker
Deuteronomy 26:1-15

Today is stewardship Sunday. Today we are challenged to think about the role of our giving in our life. We want to do more than say: “Hey everyone! It costs a lot of money to run a church! Please give generously.” We want to reflect on how our giving can shape our faith and life. We want to reflect on how giving shapes our soul. To do that we will look at the way that the Israelites did Stewardship Sunday. Yes, the ancient Israelites had their version of Stewardship Sunday too. According to Numbers 28, their stewardship Sunday was part of their harvest festival, the feast of Weeks—what modern Jews call Shavuot. At the end of the harvest festival, the Israelites who had come to Jerusalem would participate in the ritual of the first fruits. At the ritual of the first fruits, the people gave their annual gift and it went something like this (Deut. 26:1-11).

That’s the way the Israelites gave their annual gift. Can you picture it in your mind? There are basically 4 steps to the ritual. First you gathered your gift from the produce of your year, you put it in a basket and you brought it to the tabernacle. At the tabernacle, presumably at the entrance, you gave your basket to the priest. The priest would take the basket with your offering into the Tabernacle and he would ceremoniously carry it up to the altar. And as your yearly gift was laid before the altar, you would recite the prescribed words of the liturgy: Those are the words we find in verses 5-10 of our passage, *“My Father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation...”* The reading goes on to describe the mighty acts of God on behalf of Israel: saving her from Egypt, making her a great nation, giving her a good and fruitful land. That’s the ritual. Every year you would follow the same pattern. The basket, the priest, up to the altar, the words. The same thing over and over and over again.

Why did God make them give this way? Why did he make them do this ritual? It wasn’t convenient. Travelling all the way to Jerusalem! Getting the kids together and luggage together year after year! Wouldn’t their time be better spent working the fields and tending to the flocks and herds? Couldn’t they just hire a local Levite to take all the regional offerings to the temple on their behalf. And why the same words year after year after year? Couldn’t they just drop off the gift and leave? They’d said the offering litany so many times they could probably say it in their sleep, “My Father was a wandering Aramean and he went down to Egypt, yada yada.” Why does God make them go through this ritual?!

Before I answer that, let me ask you a question: Does the Israelite giving ritual described in Deuteronomy 26 remind you of anything? Does this ritual with the baskets carried up to the altar remind you of anything that we do? I hope it reminds you of our own weekly offering. Every week, you bring some of the fruit of your labor to church. You put it into a basket. You give the basket to a deacon—not a priest exactly, but a church official of some kind. Those deacons carry your offering in the basket up to the altar...or, in the Reformed tradition, the table. And as they lay the offering down at the front, we all recite the ritual words! We say the same words every week. As the deacons get about ¾ of the way down the aisle, Larry finishes his modulation and he plays the magic chord—that dominant 7th G chord- and we all rise and we say *“Praise God from Whom all Blessings flow. Praise him all creatures here below. Praise him above ye heavenly host. Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.”* Same words every week. We could sing them in our sleep. Do you see how the way we do our offerings is based on the first fruit ritual of Deuteronomy 26?

Why do we do it this way...week after week? The same song. The same words. The same ritual. In this day and age, there are lots of different ways to collect money for church or money for other causes. A lot of us give via EFT—Electronic file transfer. Still, more of us send in checks by mail. Couldn’t we just have everyone do that and get rid of the weekly offering? It would keep the services from being too long. Or maybe a giving ATM. Some churches have those. You put in the church lobby and you can swipe your card and give your gift. Press one for debit. Press two for credit. How about that? Why do we do this ritual with the same actions and the same words when there are all sorts of other ways to collect financial gifts?

We do it this way because the ritual matters, the habit matters, the practice matters. We do it because when we give this way, we tie into an ancient ritual that God gave his people and that’s important. It’s amazing to be part of something that God’s people have done, in one form or another, for more than 3000 years! But more to the point, we do it because when we give this way, the Spirit teaches us something about our God.

When Israel gave their baskets at the tabernacle and said their words, when we give our baskets at the table and sing our words, the Spirit is forming us, the Spirit is shaping us, the Spirit is teaching us about who God is.

That's how all ritual works. Take the Lord's Prayer for example. You learn the Lord's Prayer as a child and pretty soon you're saying it everywhere. You say it at church. You say it at your Christian school. You say it at home around the dinner table. Pretty soon you just rattle it off. "*Give us this daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.*" You could say it in your sleep. But then one-day, calamity comes into your life. Someone you love, someone you leaned on, is suddenly taken from your life. You didn't even realize how much her life was part of yours. You didn't realize you were leaning until she was taken away and now you're staggering around trying to find your feet. Every morning you wake up and you can't imagine HOW you are going to get through another day. Now when you pray "Father, give me this day my daily bread," it sounds completely different. "*Please Father! Give me this day, this morning, this hour my daily bread. Get me through this day.*" You pray this prayer like a drowning man clinging to a raft. Now this prayer is bread for your soul, and you are so grateful for all those times you rattled off this ritual prayer. Rituals form us. The Holy Spirit uses our Christian Rituals to shape us.

So how did this first fruit ritual shape the people of Israel? What did they learn when they gave their gifts and said these words year after year? First, the ritual would deepen their trust of God's faithfulness. When the people recited those words, "My father was a wandering Aramean" and everything that followed, God was training them to measure their problems against God's faithfulness.

The whole litany follows a pattern: the people would remember a time of struggle or pain in their life, and they would remember God's deliverance from that struggle. My Father was a wandering homeless Aramean. But God made him a great nation. My ancestors suffered miserably in Egypt. But the Lord brought us out of there with signs and wonders. We didn't have a land to call our own. But God gave us a land of milk and honey. The ritual taught Israel to measure their problems against God's great faithfulness. That's such an important Spiritual move.

We all come here with terrible worries. Our child is in crisis. Our marriage is a battle. Our health is spiraling down. Our finances are a mess. How do we usually measure these problems? What do we usually measure these problems against? Usually it's against our own strength. We measure our problem against our own powers. And when we do that we are overwhelmed. We're terrified. More than that, we close up. We close our hands and we close our hearts, our compassion shuts down. We feel as though we have nothing to give.

The ritual that ancient Israel practiced in the temple, and the ritual that we practice every week, teaches us to measure our problems against God's great faithfulness. When you measure your problem against God's faithfulness even when you don't see any solution, even when your heart is breaking, even when you can see absolutely no way through this thing, you still have hope. It may be a hope that you express through tears, but it's a real hope because it's rooted in God. And it's enough hope that even in crisis, you can still keep moving forward and you can still flow out to others in love and generosity and giving.

That brings us to the second thing our giving rituals do. The Spirit uses them to remind us that life is good, and blessing and love are at the center of the world. Giving our gifts and singing our song remind us that life is good, and love and blessing are at the center of the world. Another way to say this: our giving ritual keeps us from worshipping Baal. Worshipping Baal?! I didn't know I was in danger of worshipping Baal! Well you are. We all are. Baal's view of the world and the Lord's view of the world have been competing for more than 3000 years. There are lots of people who do not see love and grace at the center of this world. There are lots of people who see hunger and strength, desire and competition at the center of this world. That's Canaanite religion. That's Baal's way of seeing things. The gods of the Canaanites aren't loving covenanting blessing sorts of gods. They are conniving, calculating gods. They're competitive gods. They're "I'll scratch your back you scratch mine" kind of gods.

Baal for instance. In the Canaanite myths, Baal was the god of thunder and storm and he became Lord of the gods when he defeated Yam the god of the sea in a contest. Baal took a magic club, he smashed Yam on the head and then he dragged his body out of the sea and cut him to little pieces. It was all struggle and war between the Canaanite gods. They were forever angling for power and they won that power by being fierce and ruthless. The struggle goes all the way down. In the Canaanite creation myths the world is born out of struggle and violent competition. Baal worship teaches that life is a struggle, so never stop fighting.

In our book, God tells a very different story! God tells us that this world was created in love. It was created, freely and joyfully, by a God who loved us and gave us a beautiful garden to live in. In our book God shows us that he does indeed defeat the powers of evil, but Jesus does it through an act of sacrificial love and amazing grace.

There are lots of people today who live by Baal's take no prisoners creed. I was watching figure skating a couple of weeks ago. One of the competitors was a wispy little Russian skater. She was 15 years old. She was doing triple axels like it was breathing. The announcers said she was a fierce competitor and that the philosophy she lived by was, "Second place is the first loser." That's Canaanite religion. Canaanite religion says, "Desire and competition are at the center of the world. So, stay strong. Stay hungry." In his word God tells us, love and blessing are at the center of the world. So love one another, and praise God from whom all blessings flow!

This week, we LaGrave members will have a chance to go home and consider our annual gift. Next week those of us who remember will bring our pledge envelope to church. We will place our envelope containing the fruits of our labor in the basket and the deacons will bring the offerings up here to the Lord's table. Larry will play the magic chord and we will rise to sing our song. Together we will sing the truth at the center of our world and the truth at the center of our life: We belong body and soul in life and in death to a God who created this world in love, who saved this world in love and who will make all things new in love. We will let His love and His blessing open our hands. We will let His love take its rightful place at the center of our hearts.

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