

SERMON

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

460 East Main Street

Lexington, Kentucky 40507

With a Grateful Prayer from a Thankful Heart

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

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Deuteronomy 26: 1-11

Every time I read this passage, a song begins to sound somewhere within me. I blame one of my professors for that, as he once suggested that trying to figure out what music you hear when reading a text can be a clue to what the passage might be telling you.

So for decades I've read scripture with that suggestion in the back of my mind. Some passages, I hear no music, no matter how hard I listen for it.

But this one? The music always plays, which is why I've been whistling it while walking the halls here this past week, or while driving across town.

And the song that grabs me certainly isn't a Lenten song. Far from it. In fact, it's from the Muppet Christmas Carol.

Did you ever see that movie?

Michael Caine plays Scrooge, and he does a wonderful job throughout.

But it's the song at the end that has been playing on an endless loop for me this week.

The once-miserly Scrooge—transformed by the visions his visitors have shared—sings the lines, “...and every night will end, and every day will start, with a grateful prayer from a thankful heart.”

That's what Deuteronomy pictures—thankful hearts lifted up and poured out in response to God's goodness and care.

Of course, a grateful prayer from a thankful heart isn't possible if we get so lost in the busyness of life, or if we begin to think that we're responsible for everything—if we forget the enduring faithfulness of God.

And it's so easy to do that—to forget that God is the source of and sustainer of life. That's why we turn to Deuteronomy, because right in the middle of our text is a stunning reminder of who we are. In the ritualized liturgy of the community of faith, the people were commanded (You *shall*) to bring the first fruits of their labors and present it to the priest as an offering to God. And, as they gave their gifts in response to God's goodness, they were to speak words that would keep their memory straight. If they could keep this memory alive, they would not yield to the temptation to think that they had gotten the land and its produce of their own doing, but solely by the grace of God.

And so as they handed their gift to the priest, the people were to rehearse the story of their ancestors, saying words like these:

“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."

That language sounds a lot like a grateful song from a thankful heart, for it shows the deep awareness of the blessings of God that have guided them and protected them and sustained them in their wanderings.

Looking back at their story, they understood the gifts they had received. It was God who had freed them; it was God who had fed them; it was God who had loved them beyond all measure.

And, if they could remember that, they would find their lives overflowing in generosity to God, giving not just what was left over after all of their needs were taken care of, but giving to God from their first fruits.

Obviously, this is said before the people have gone into the land, but there's every indication that the people would fulfill this command to give of their first fruits, because there's a story in the Book of Exodus that tells about a time that Moses had to stand up and say to the people: "Stop giving!"

Have you ever heard that story?

They were about to build a sanctuary, and Moses told the people what it would take, and then he said this: **"Let whoever is of a generous heart bring the Lord's offering."**

That's it. Whoever is of a generous heart, let them give—and the congregation went wild. The women and men went back to their tents, collected their gold, their bronze, and their silver, and brought it all to Moses. The people came, and they came, and they came; morning, noon and night; offering their treasures, their gifts, their talents, their very selves in response to God's faithfulness to them. According to this Scripture, they did not give to be recognized, or because the current church programming was meeting their needs, or because they hoped to bribe God into blessing them more.

No, none of those motivations was behind their staggeringly generous stewardship. At least for that particular moment in the congregation's life, their entire motivation was that they recognized that life itself is a gift from God. And when you look at life as pure gift, the only way to live is by responding with deep and abiding gratitude. So the people gave, and gave, and gave—so much that Moses actually had to ask them to stop giving. Can you imagine it?

Most of us can't. We spend hours in the church trying to figure out what it will take to get us—and I include myself—to give generously of our first fruits. And so we throw out all sorts of ideas that amount to nothing, because guilt won't produce generosity. Shame won't do it either. Slick stewardship messages, letters, and charts, and calculating "your fair share" won't do it. Not even a million stewardship sermons on extravagant giving can create generosity. Only one thing will, and that's what the Book of Deuteronomy invites us to. It is only the awareness—the deep awareness—of the abundant and undeserved goodness of God that will enable us to give generously in response to what God has done.

And God is doing so much here. From where I stand, I see so many amazing ways that God has blessed us as a congregation, and how that blessing from God is so that through our ministry others would be blessed as well. One of the great joys of ministry here is seeing some things that not all of you get to see, but I see them—and if I don't see them, someone tells me about them. I see lives—including our own—being changed by God through the ministry you are offering to the world.

We're by no means a perfect congregation or witness to the resurrection, but in my short time among you, I have seen some amazing things. And so I invite you to look at what I see among us that are surely blessings from God:

Stand in this place on any Sunday morning and join your voice with those many others, singing of God's love and care and tenderness, and it's hard to miss the blessing of God.

See the faces of the children as they come forward to meet Jen and Jessica and Mark.

Drop by the church on a Monday morning and watch as meals are prepared and then shared with vulnerable neighbors in our community.

Just come and walk around this building throughout the week, and you'll see people moving throughout every square inch of this building. You'll see things like book groups seeking to grow in their faith; you'll hear the laughter of young people learning with Sara and the others serving alongside them engaged in study or service or play; you might bump into a group of disciples gathered to pack backpacks with food and love.

You might see Jackie or Sara or David heading out to visit someone in the hospital, taking with them the congregation's love and prayers.

Or maybe you'll hear such glorious music as the choir rehearses, or lose yourself as you hear Martha practicing for what she makes sound so simple here.

Or do what I do so many times each week—just walk into this space and let its beauty overtake you. Watch the light stream through the windows and listen for the echoes of those who have gathered here for generations to sing and to pray and to hope in this place.

You'll see people gathering to think about justice—and how what we want for those closest to us might also become our desire for each one around us.

You'll hear people talking about where they've served before—whether lifting a hammer to build a house or serving on some mission team that goes somewhere to serve in response to God's call.

But I really must warn you: If you allow yourself to fully appreciate the abundance of our God, your generosity may well overflow. You'll be reaching for your checkbook before you know it. You'll start putting bigger amounts on your checks and may even give more than you thought possible. And the next thing you know...you'll hear yourself singing as one of those joyful people that spends their whole life giving thanks...*“And every night will end, and every day will start...with a grateful prayer from a thankful heart.”*