

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“First Fruits”

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Matthew 6: 24-34

‘No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

‘Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

‘So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

First fruits. The first time I heard the expression I was too young to have any appreciation of its meaning. My family had moved from the city limits of Stanton, Michigan to a small 60 acre farm. I thought that farm was about the biggest thing I had ever seen though. There was a big old farmhouse with an attic and a Michigan basement. There were lots of other buildings- a barn, a milk house, a tool shed, a woodshed, and conveniently enough, since the house did not have indoor plumbing, an outhouse. And there were fields and trees and a swamp.

On a section of the property, bordering the long driveway was perhaps my favorite part of the farm. It was the peach orchard. There were about twenty trees that in the late summer were just loaded with perhaps my favorite fruit in the entire world. I would delight in watching the peach trees blossom and the fruit began to mature and ripen. I couldn’t wait for the day when I could pick a large fresh peach, sink my teeth into it, and let the juice run down my face, all over my shirt.

There was one problem to my “peach fantasies.” My mother had control over the peach orchard. And she had rather strict rules. She demanded that all of the peaches we picked from the trees, those beautiful ones that I had been keeping my eye upon all summer, would be placed in baskets. These peaches my mother decreed would be given as gifts to special friends who had treated our family kindly throughout the year. At that time I did not know of any biblical or theological implications. But I remembered she called those quality peaches set aside for others, “the first fruits.” After those friends were cared for, the remainder of the peaches on the

tree would be made available for sale to those who summered at cottages at a nearby lake. It was a way that my mother earned a little extra spending money.

Now you might ask, as I often did as a child, what peaches did I get to eat? The answer was quite obvious for my mother. My brother and sister and I got to eat the peaches that had fallen from the tree onto the ground. "Drops," she called them. Not a very attractive name. We got to eat them provided they were bruised or blemished or just plain awful looking. While the "first fruits" were given to others to offer appreciation and thanks, I had to settle for "the drops" or the leftovers. I complained about it a great deal, but I guess I learned in that experience that even in your use of blessings you might enjoy, consideration of others needed to be a priority.

I've spent some time recently watching some televangelists. I watch not so much because of the content of the programs but because some of these ministers are talented speakers and I am fascinated by how they get their message across to their audience. I was watching a week or so ago, during a fundraising event and the preacher's sermon was about first fruits. I knew that I would be preaching on it soon so it got my attention and I was ready to take notes. First fruits, the preacher said, are the gifts that one offers to God before the giver does anything else with their time or money or talent. Essentially it is God's take off the top of all of all you collect. The preacher had a couple of concrete suggestions for givers to his ministry. In addition to regular giving, each person should contribute a first fruits offering. Individuals are to offer the first week of their salary each year and businesses are to offer a month of their profit each and every year. As much as our Board of Trustees might like this idea, from a practical financial perspective I thought that perhaps this interpretation would not be received well within the congregation. I might have been viewing things with a cynical eye, but it seemed to me that the preacher was more concerned with the financial ledger of his television network than he was the spiritual life of his listeners. I decided I needed to do more research!

The Scripture lesson from Deuteronomy is one of the oldest passages in the entire Bible. The words are attributed to Moses, who spoke to the people about the meaning of their journey out of Egypt and through the wilderness and into the Promised Land. These are words that were to be repeated by each and every generation, reminding them of two things. First, the land that they live upon and which has given them a harvest is a gift from God. Second, a gift needs to be returned to God and the giving of that gift is done with intention and commitment. The one who makes the gift is also making a statement of faith.

These words in the lesson were spoken by the people during an annual special worship service, celebrated at the time of harvest. The words were spoken as an invitation to offering, the offering of the first fruits. This offering was the first of the harvest. Tradition says that nothing else could be harvested until this offering was made. Work and the routine of life paused in order to recognize a higher spiritual priority. The words of affirmation were spoken by each individual so everyone would be a participant in the ancient story and a part of the covenant between God and God's people.

Theologian G. Van der Leew writes that the first fruits offering has three essential characteristics. First of all, it is personal. While worship offerings are normally a communal experience, in the giving of first fruits each person has to return a gift to God. Each one of us professes our faith when symbolically we step to the altar and confess that we have been blessed by God's promise and then in gratitude offer to God a gift of ourselves. We may celebrate with others in the faith community in the spirit of corporate thanksgiving but there comes a time in which we must discover, nurture and return God's gifts as individual people of faith.

And the gift we return to God must be personal. It cannot be something of which we wish to dispose. It has to be a meaningful part of ourselves. It is not something that we are happy about giving away. It cannot be something that we are prepared to give away at next week's rummage sale. Our first fruits gift to God is not something left over after all our other life's desires have been cared for. It has to be something valuable, something important,

something sacrificial, something that affects us, something that acknowledges the recognition of God's hand in our life. Our gift has to be first fruit peaches not the drops from the tree.

Secondly, the gift of first fruits creates communion. Since the gift is personal, it creates a bond between the giver and the recipient. What is given is significant enough to place you in relationship to God.

A couple of Christmases ago I shared with you the best Christmas present I ever received. While we were still dating and while we were still figuring out the future of our relationship, Laura gave me an official Detroit Tiger jacket. I couldn't afford it. I knew that she couldn't afford it. The jacket was wonderful. But the meaning of the gift was even greater. It told me how much she cared for me. It told me that she was willing to risk something to build a future together. It created greater trust and hope in the promise of our relationship.

The offering of a gift to God doesn't end our relationship with the Creator. Rather it is something that draws our focus on God's grace in our life. It brings us closer to the recognition of the divine source of life.

Finally, the giving of first fruit gifts is reciprocal. Because God has given to you, a gift to God is demanded in return. Because a gift to God is given, a gift will be given in return to you. Receiving a gift demands a gift. The recipient is in the power of the giver.

There was a family within our church in Salt Lake City that was constantly purchasing gifts for Maren and Amelia. Every Christmas or birthday or graduation or Valentine's Day or Halloween, they bought them something. Laura and I wished that they would stop giving these gifts because it put us in the situation of feeling that we had to return the gift with a future gift.

Theologian Paul Tillich writes that the reason most of us do not appreciate the idea of undeserved gifts is because we instinctively realize that such a gift makes us somehow dependent on the giver. But with God it is fine to accept such grace. Dependence upon God is a good thing, in fact a desired thing. When we are grateful, we recognize that God has favored us, whether we deserve favoring or not. The honest realization of God's gifts to us moves us to offer a gift to God. We then understand even more clearly that God has greater blessings yet to bestow upon us.

First fruits then are a philosophy of giving, not of giving the first things you receive but of recognizing that returning gifts to God comes first. It is an act of faith, a statement made in acts of stewardship that remembers what God has done in the past and which opens us in promise of God for the future.

When people ask me what my favorite moments in worship services are, the answer is easy. One is Christmas Eve candlelighting. Yet the other most moving moments in the church year for me is Consecration Sunday. Perhaps it is as close to that First Fruits worship celebration of the ancient Israelites as we can get! It is a holy experience watching everyone in this community of faith, walking down the aisle, bringing their estimate of giving cards forward, offering of their best as they lay their financial commitments of faith down at the front of our worship space, dedicating them to God.

Let us in this season consider what God has given to us in the harvest that blesses our life. May we be moved to return to God a gift worthy of the divine giver. May our gift recognize that what we have is a gift. May our gift place us in relationship with God who promises us much more within the life of faith in our future.