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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Lent 1, Series C
Saturday, March 9th, 2019
Sunday, March 10th, 2019

Sermon: Our Giving God

Text: Deuteronomy 26:1-11¹

Focus: God is the greatest Giver of gifts.

Function: That they would respond to God's gifts with joyful worship and generous offerings.

Structure: Text-Application

Locus: "For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey him" (SC, 1st Article).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Today's Old Testament is all about giving. In Deuteronomy 26, the Lord God gives instructions to Israel about their first-fruits offering. This offering is to be a joyful act of worship in response to God giving them the Promised Land (vv. 10-11). But Deuteronomy 26 is more than just a liturgy for passing the plate. It's a celebration of God and his gifts. Six times Moses says that God *gives* to his people. That's because we have a God who loves to give good gifts! The Lord gave Israel the land of Canaan, "a land flowing with milk and honey" (v. 9, ESV).² As a child, whenever I heard about the land flowing with milk and honey, my imagination conjured up images of literal rivers of honey and streams of milk (kind of like the chocolate river in *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*). It wasn't until I went to seminary that I finally understand that honey symbolizes the nectar of fruitful crops, and the milk represents abundant herds of cattle. Furthermore, not until I saw photographs of the barren, rocky landscape of Israel did I realize that the mention of a land flowing with milk and honey was more *theological* than *geological*.

¹ This is a revision of a sermon originally preached on February 17th, 2013, at Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado.

² All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

The point is this: *God* gives them fruitful crops from the earth (vv. 2, 10). He answers their prayers (v. 7), frees them from slavery, and rescues them from their enemies (v. 8). The Lord keeps his Word and answers prayer. *That's* what Deuteronomy is all about!

Today's Word comes near the end of Moses' farewell speech to Israel. Last week we read about Moses' funeral on Mt. Nebo (Deut. 34:1-12). This week we read part of his Last Will and Testament, which is really a *testimony* to everything God did for Israel. The entire Book of Deuteronomy is basically Moses' last sermon before he dies. Thus, the Hebrew title for Deuteronomy means "The Words."³ "These are *the words* that Moses spoke to all Israel..." (Deut. 1:1). Its Hebrew title can also be translated "The Promises" (cf. Josh. 21:45). So Deuteronomy is a record of The Lord keeping his promises to his people. (And God *always* keeps his promises!)

The promise before us today is God's promise to give Israel the land of Canaan. This is "the land that the Lord swore to our fathers to give us" (Deut. 26:3). The Lord promised this land to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob--and Jacob's children and grandchildren after him. The Israelites were heirs to that promise. After 400 hundred of years of living as foreigners in Canaan and slaves in Egypt, God's Word finally came true. The Israelites were about to cross the Jordan River and enter the Promised Land. The promise was about to bear fruit. They were finally taking possession of their promised inheritance (Deut. 26:1).

And so they needed to give thanks. The Lord said that after the Israelites took possession of the land and harvested their crops, they needed to present an offering to the Lord. This offering of first-fruits, or *best* fruits,⁴ was a testimony to the goodness of our giving God: "I declare today to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our

³ Hebrew: *ha-devarim*.

⁴ Hebrew: *rēshūth*.

fathers *to give us*” (Deut. 26:3). “You shall rejoice in all the good that the Lord your God has given to you...” (Deut. 26:11; cp. 12:5-6; 15:19-20). From every harvest, calving, and lambing, the Israelites would take the first and best of what God gave them—and then give it *back* to him as a way to say, “Thanks, Lord! You’re so good to me! Thank you for taking care of all my needs. Here’s a little piece I’m giving back to you, so your priests and ministers, the widows, the orphans, the poor—and the foreigners among us—all have something to eat. You’ve already blessed me, Lord, so now bless *them!*”

And so the first-fruits offering was an act of worship, a way to praise the Lord (Deut. 26:10). In the Old Testament, there are two basic verbs for “worship.” One means to “work” or “serve” (cp. Ex. 7:16). The other means to “bow down in reverence.” That’s the word used here. When the Israelites gave their first-fruits, they bowed down before their Creator and acknowledged their creaturely dependence on him. God is God, and we are not. Sometimes we need the posture of prayer to remind us of that.

Giving an offering is a kind of sacrifice. It’s humbling, but not humiliating. Giving is an act of trust that says we have faith God is going to take care of our needs, even if we give him the first and best of all we have. And rather than an occasion for sadness, giving is a time for celebration! “You shall *rejoice* in all the good that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house...” (Deut. 26:11).

Of course, the Israelites might be tempted *not* to give. They might not trust God or believe his promise to take care of them. Maybe they’d hold back their tithes and offerings of the first-fruits out of selfishness or fear. In their arrogance, they might even be tempted to worship the work of their hands and boast of their possessions, forgetting that everything they had was a gift from God.

As fallen, sinful human beings, we're always tempted to take the credit and glory away from God. Giving thanks and giving back are not natural to sinners. In our pride we boast, "Look at me! Look at what *I* did! Look at what *I* own! Look at *my* house, *my* car, *my* job! What does God have to do with it? It's mine, *mine*, *MINE!*"

But that's not how God's people are supposed to live. So earlier in Deuteronomy 8, Moses warns: "Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of *my* hand have gotten me this wealth.' You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth..." (Deut. 8:17-18). If Israel forgot the Lord and all that he did for them, he would punish them, and they would perish, disappearing off the map (Deut. 8:19-20). But if they remembered the Lord and kept his Commandments, worshiping him, receiving his grace and mercy, serving him, and shining his light to the nations around them, God would bless them abundantly, and they would dwell in the land forever (Deuteronomy 11). "For man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord" (Deut. 8:3; cp. Luke 4:4).

So what has God given to *you*? And what are you going to do with it? How are you going to respond to God's gifts in worship? What kind of an offering will *you* bring? Will you rejoice as you give?

Dear Christian friends, everything we have is a gift from God! Even the time, talents, and abilities by which we learn, work, and earn a living are gifts from God. Only by his Word and grace do we live, work, learn, and play (Deut. 8:19-20). Every good and perfect gift comes from our heavenly Father (Jas. 1:17). We have a God who loves to give his people gifts. In fact, generosity is part of the very nature and character of God—"For God so loved the world *that he gave...*" (John 3:16). He gave Israel the Ten Commandments and the Promised Land. He gives

you so much more! “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Through Jesus, God gives you the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation! He takes away your sin and gives you his righteousness. He dies your death and gives you eternal life. God’s greatest gift is grace (Eph. 2:8-9).

The Lord also provides our daily bread and showers us with every physical blessing. In the *Small Catechism*, Dr. Martin Luther writes that God “gives me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, spouse, children, land, animals, and all that I have. He richly and daily provides me with *all* that I need to support this body and life.... For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him” (SC, 1st Article of Apostles’ Creed). According to Luther, God gives you everything—including the kitchen sink! And so we bring our tithes and offerings to the Lord.

Giving is always an act of worship, a response to God’s goodness (Deut. 26:5, 10). “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). We give because he first gave to us. And he gave us *Himself!* With the psalmist, we sing, “What shall I render to the Lord for all his benefits to me?” (Ps. 116:12). In other words, what can I give God in exchange for everything he does for me? How can I repay the Lord for all his goodness? The short answer is YOU CAN’T! No matter how much you put in the offering plate or how many hours you volunteer at church or in our community, you will never be able to out-give God!

Did you know that God doesn’t need you to give? It’s true. He says, “For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills.... If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine” (Ps. 50:10, 12). In other words, if God wanted a big, juicy steak,

he wouldn't ask you to sacrifice a cow. No, he'd just take one. God doesn't need you to give. *You* need you to give, because your offering reflects your relationship with God in your heart.

We are glad to give an offering to the Lord! We rejoice that we can support the mission and ministry of the local church and its workers (1 Tim. 5:17-18; 1 Cor. 9:14; Gal. 6:6-7). We celebrate that we make a difference in our community among the poor widows, orphans, and strangers who live among us (Deut. 26:12-13; cp. Jas. 1:27; 1 Tim. 5:3). God commanded Israel to give the first-fruits of their crops, herds, and flocks. Of course, those of you who grew up on farms or ranches are familiar with the agrarian lifestyle of the Old Testament. But first-fruits are a foreign concept to most of us, who have white collar jobs and grew up near the city.

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul says, "Each one must give as he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor. 9:7). God loves a cheerful giver. I often joke that God also loves a *grumpy* giver because he is so loving and kind. But God appreciates a cheerful giver, a joyful giver—a *hilarious* giver!⁵ When we gather for worship, the offering should be one of the highlights of our service—if not your *favorite* part! At the church my nieces attend, the children bring up their offerings during the children's message. And because they're so happy and excited to give something back to God, they race to the front of the church to be the first to put in their offering. Because of everything God does for us, *we* are glad to give!

So when you come to worship and write your check or put your money in the plate, remember what God has done for you. Remember the death Jesus died on the cross for you. Consider all the other gifts with which God has blessed you. Then respond with prayer and praise, joyful thanks, giving back, and telling other people what God has done. That's what

⁵ Greek: *hilaros*, from which we derive the English word "hilarious."

worship is all about: giving back to our giving God who gave his Son Jesus to live and die *for us*.

For we have a giving God who loves to give his people gifts. In Jesus' name. Amen.