

This is the last sermon in my stewardship sermon series. If you have nothing else for which to give thanks this Thanksgiving, you might be grateful for that. We’ve talked about how everything we have comes from God and belongs to God. We’ve talked about caring for God’s creation. Today, I want to talk about the importance of first things.

Before I get to the Scripture reading, let me set the stage. When the Hebrew people were enslaved in Egypt, they cried out to God for help. God heard their cries, and promised them a land of their own, a land flowing with milk and honey. Moses led them out of Egypt to that Promised Land.

The Old Testament book of Deuteronomy is set at the end of that journey. The Israelites – whom Moses has led as they wandered in the wilderness for the past 40 years – are camped on the plateau of Moab. The Promised Land lies just the other side of the Jordan River.

With that land in sight, as well as the fulfillment of God’s promise, Moses gathered them for some final instructions. Those instructions are the book of Deuteronomy and they include these words: **Read Deuteronomy 26:1-11.**

It seems to be a truth about life that how we start something matters. You might be familiar with the book, *Make Your Bed* by the retired Admiral William McRaven. He argues that starting the day with an accomplishment, even as simple as making one’s bed, can set the stage for greater achievements to come.

This past week, I was reading a diet book. I know what you’re thinking. Why would you be reading a diet book? I was looking up something for a friend. There’s a chapter titled “Tools That Make It Work.” In that chapter, it suggests that making one’s bed, first thing in the morning, can be helpful with weight loss. The author writes, “When we do, it sets the day off on a positive foot. It’s an active respect for yourself and your home and it immediately says to your brain, ‘I am someone who accomplishes tasks. Go me!’”

We have this saying: “You only get one chance to make a first impression.” The reason that’s a saying is that we understand the importance of a first impression. A first impression can determine the course of a relationship. First impressions are often wrong. They can be overcome, of course. But the first impression sets the stage for what follows.

What comes first sets the tone for that which follows and it turns out that principle holds true with our giving. Moses told the people when they entered the Promised Land, when they actually took possession of it and were settled, they were to take some of the first of the harvest God provided, from the land God provided, and bring it to a place dedicated to God.

Notice, they were to do this after they were settled and established. God didn’t demand their first fruits when they were slaves in Egypt, or when they wandered in the wilderness picking up their daily manna from the ground. Maybe not when you’re young, or going through a divorce or a layoff, but when you’re settled, respond to God’s goodness with your first fruits.

That's why, along with bringing the first fruits of the harvest, they were required to recite the history of God's saving activity. They got to where they were, because of what God did in the past. History always impinges on the present. That's why it's important for children to learn accurate history. As William Faulkner said, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." The fact they would have a harvest, at all, was due to God's power and love, past and present.

Dedicating to God the first of their produce would set the tone for the rest of their relationship with God. It was a way to strengthen their faith. It wouldn't take faith to dedicate the last of their produce to God, to give God the leftovers. To give God the first of their produce required faith, because nobody ever knows what the future holds. Dedicating the first fruits to God was a way of putting one's money where one's mouth is and saying, "I can give the first of my produce for God's purposes, because I have faith God will continue to provide. I will trust in the God that has brought me this far."

As you know, we invite you to fill out a card providing an estimate of your giving to the church for 2023. On one level, it's a mundane procedure that helps us to plan what we can and can't do in terms of ministry for the next year. One way to approach it would be to give a portion of what's left over after we plan how much we want to spend eating out, taking vacations, buying clothes, and paying the bills.

However, our financial contribution can be an act of faith. It can set the tone for our entire relationship with God. Instead of filling out the card with the same amount every year, just because it's the path of least resistance, we could stretch in our giving. It can be a way of saying, "I don't know what the future holds, but I'm going to trust that God will provide for me. I'm going to have faith in the God that has brought me this far." For those who still write checks, as I do, then the check to the church becomes the first one we write each month: first fruits. It doesn't matter how big that check is. The point is that what comes first sets the tone for what follows.

The Board of Assessors won't be happy with me saying this, but don't financially contribute because the church needs money. That's not why we do it. We give to God's work in the world, through the church, out of gratitude for what God has done for us. We do it because Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." We do it, because that which comes first matters. It's a concrete way to put God first in our lives. And when God comes first in our lives, everything else tends to fall into place.

That's why we worship on Sunday morning. It's the first day of the week. We start the week giving thanks to God and offering praise. I'm not opposed to midweek services or services on Saturday, but I think there is something to be said for worshiping on the morning of the first day of the week. Offering God the first of our time, sets the tone for the rest of our time.

In case you're thinking this emphasis on what comes first is just an Old Testament teaching, I might remind you of what Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount. He spoke to his listeners about not worrying about their lives. Don't worry about what you will eat or what you will drink, or about...what you will wear."

Jesus explains how worrying cannot add a single hour to one's life and how if God clothes the lilies of the field, surely God will clothe each of us. He instructed his listeners not to strive for any of these things. He said, "But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." Even Jesus believed that keeping first things first, was the way to get all our needs met.

I'm grateful we have the Gratitude Luncheon following today's service at which anyone can sit at a table with others and enjoy a Thanksgiving meal. I'm sure that around many tables, this Thanksgiving, folks will go around and say something for which they are grateful. I think that's a wonderful ritual. But I have a suggestion for a little twist on that Thanksgiving tradition. What if, like the Israelites in our reading were instructed, we go around the table and name something God has done for us? What has God done for us?

My parents met as young counselors at a Christian camp in Rhode Island. I might say, "I'm grateful God was active in the lives of my parents 60 years ago, which led to my very existence." Imagine the things we might hear. When I had cancer, God surrounded me with friends and medical professionals to care for me and fight with me. When I was losing my battle against addiction, God gave me the strength and the community to keep going. When I felt riddled with shame, and unlovable, and helpless to do anything about it, God forgave me and accepted me and offered me another chance.

When they were settled in the Promised Land, Moses instructed the people to do three things. First, they were to bring a portion of their first fruits of the harvest. Secondly, they were to recite the story of how God saved them from oppression and made of them a mighty nation. Thirdly, they were to gather together with everyone, including the priests and whatever foreigners resided among them, and celebrate with all the bounty that was collected.

Some of us have been settled a long time. We've experienced quite a few harvests.

Let us bring our offering.

Let us declare what God has done for us.

And let the celebration begin.