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A BASKETFUL OF JOY



Deuteronomy 26:1-11 A Sermon

By Wayne Dockery

I sat as a child, the morning sun streaming in the windows to our left, in a little rock building in rural Johnson, Arkansas. Every Sunday I was there for worship—there was no children’s worship. And every Sunday I soaked in the movements and phrases and songs and ritual greetings there that were characteristic of that Church of Christ. And with it, I soaked up the faith. I discovered in writing this sermon that many of the words and phrases and movements and songs and people are still as vivid to me now as they were then. Some of those memories surround the offering.

The Offering: A Memory

Every Sunday at the same time, after the white communion cloth had been spread back over the precious elements hidden there, one of the three men who had presided at the Lord’s table, the one in the middle, would turn around to a hollow enclave in the front of the massive wooden pulpit behind him and produce two woven baskets. One he would hand to a person beside him, and the other he would take in both hands. And then he would say, “And now, separate and apart from our regular worship, we have an opportunity to return a small portion of what we have been given.” (This always frosted my Dad to hear this. He and Mom had decided long ago to give 15% of their income, off the top, to the Lord. They reasoned that even the Jews gave a tenth; how much more blessed had we been? So Dad thought it shabby to suggest only a “small portion” be returned). Nevertheless, after this brief introit each Sunday, the man with the basket in both hands would bow his

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head over it, close his eyes, and say these words, “Our heavenly Father, thank you for the blessings you have blessed us with. May we now give back a portion of that which you have given us. May this money be used in accordance with your will. In Jesus’ name, Amen.” Then the men would proceed to the front row—two on opposite sides of the building—one in the middle aisle, and the baskets would be passed down each row until at the back, one man would stack them all and return to the Lord’s table, his shoes making an even, clomping rhythm on the hardwood floor, the wood creaking in response. He would raise the cloth on the table, place the offering underneath, and return to his seat. All this took place in silence, as did the communion service before it. The next words heard were, “Let’s all stand and turn to page such-and-such in our song-books, after which Brother so-and-so will dismiss us.”

These same movements and words and sounds were repeated Sunday after Sunday until they were a part of me. I wonder how many of you remember that same service when you were growing up? A few phone calls to other ministers served to compare memories. I had forgotten “as we have been prospered,” and they reminded me that sometimes the offering was separate and apart “from the Lord’s Supper” instead of from “our regular worship,” and that often the whole phrase would be replaced with “as a matter of convenience, we now . . .” But the basic litany was the same in congregations of the Church of Christ all over the nation. And in this manner I learned meaning for the offering.

The Offering: Another Memory

Israel had it’s memories of the offering, too. One of these is recorded in Deuteronomy 26:1-11.

It’s a warm April in a rocky field on a hillside in Judea, a man and his sons are gathering the first harvest of the Spring. As they put the sickle to the wheat, they can look up and see

their neighbors on the hillsides and valley below also cutting wheat in great swathes across the fields and tying it in bundles and laying it in baskets to dry. Much later in the year, in August, the same father and sons will be gathering the grapes in their vineyards, already green with lush growth, and making the juice into wine. And September will bring the sweat of beating olive branches and pressing out the oil. It is a time of vigorous labor. Between these first warm days of April and the end of olive season in September, there will be “figs, pomegranates, dates, lentils, chickpeas, cucumbers, onions and leeks” to gather. There is hardly time for rest. Without the hard labor of these seasons, the long-awaited harvest would be lost.

But this is the first day of the harvest. It is a time of joy. Today they tie the first several bundles with extra care and happy ceremony, for these are reserved for the Lord, the Lord who gave them this good land, who has blessed them with children and offspring for their cattle, and who gave them this harvest. These bundles are set aside in special baskets, the best grain of the entire crop, the first to feel the sickle. For 50 days from today is the Feast of Firstfruits or Feast of Weeks, a time of grand celebration and joy.

Finally the day arrives. The whole valley is abuzz. The harvest of grain took weeks. The threshing floor had been heaped with mountains of golden, fragrant, ripened kernels. But now it is all safely buried, sealed in clay containers, ready to be made into the bread of Winter. All, that is, except the baskets of first-ripened grain, the grain set aside for the Lord. The whole family helps to heave that huge basket into the cart. And along with their neighbors they start their pilgrimage to the nearest shrine to offer their gift to the Lord.

When they arrive, the older children already know the words by heart, just as we remember the words from worship in our childhood. When it is our turn to approach the priest, we step forward with pride and say to the priest, “I declare today to the Lord your God that I have come into the land the Lord promised to our forefathers to give them.” And having heard those words, the priest takes the basket heaping with ripened grain, and we watch him as he heaves it up to his shoulder and carries it to the stone altar erected there and sets it down before the Lord. And when the altar is nearly covered with the baskets and baskets of wheat and millet and barley stacked in concentric rows and when

all the gifts have been brought, the priests again stand before us, the afternoon sun hot on our faces, and we all say with one voice the words which ring with power and faith and pride and joy, “My father was a wandering Aramaen . . .” (Would you stand and read it along with me please, the last half of verse 5, through the first half of verse 10). (Read in unison). And when we have spoken this rousing statement of faith together, and as we hear the last words echoing back from the hills around, we all bow down before the Lord in worship and thanksgiving to him. (You may be seated.) And when we have done our obeisance, the priest lifts his voice and shouts, “You shall rejoice in all the good things which the Lord your God has given to you and to your household.” And so the celebration begins, with singing and dancing and great quantities of food and drink, a great festival of play and gratitude to the Lord. And then we return home with high hearts, thankful to God for his bounty, thankful for the land we work, primed and ready to continue our long Summer’s task.

O, and what happened to all that grain? The priests themselves went to work after the festival, and carefully stored the grain. For this grain was their own food for the winter. It would also feed the fatherless and widows and strangers passing through. And sale of some of it would pay for the ongoing operation of the shrine. And the same was done with the tithes of all the produce brought in throughout the summer months.

The Offering and Us?

Well, its a nice story. But we are no longer farmers; we no longer live in the hills of Judah nor of Arkansas. What can all this mean to us? So what if the land belongs to the Lord; we’re far removed from the land. So what if the Israelites were led from bondage; what have we to do with them? Our worship is a far cry from agricultural festivals of dancing and feasting in the hot summer sun. And what in the world could we bring to the offering that could possibly carry the weight of swollen bushels of ripened corn that had felt the sharp edge of our sickle and the toss of our winnowing fork and which the whole family could heft together into the hands of God? A check is a piece of paper, no more than a few square inches. When we talk of spiritual worship, money seems most mundane. What shall we do with the offering?

When the churches of our childhood said, “Separate and apart from our regular worship .

as strictly a matter of convenience . . . ,” they were saying, “We don’t know what to do with the offering. We’re not sure how this can be a part of the worship of God.” And most of us still are not sure about including the offering fully into the worship of the church. Perhaps from this ancient Israelite festival we can learn something about the offering that may help us.

A Time of Remembering

First it became clear as we stood a few moments ago and recited together the Israelite confession of faith that the offering was for them a time of remembering. The Israelites stood at the offering and remembered all the Lord had done for them through the ages. They remembered that the land and everything they had came from the Lord. It belonged to him. It was not theirs to keep. It was not theirs to distribute as they saw fit. So too the offering is for us a time of remembering, remembering what the Lord has done for his people over the ages and remembering the great good he has shown us and our family. And particularly in his son Jesus Christ.

This is surely why the offering, at least as early as the second century, was placed in worship at the Lord’s Supper. What more appropriate time to offer thankful gifts? Beginning very early, and continuing through the early Reformation, the offering preceded the Supper. The earliest detailed accounts of worship tell of gifts of bread and wine and other gifts being brought in procession to the table. This was a powerful action of worship as mundane bread still hot from hovel hearths became a sacred feast. This way of celebrating the offering communicated how the worshipers, their gifts as well as their lives, however insignificant, were taken up by God and transformed for his holy use. Their own lives and gifts became part of the story of God’s redemption which they met to remember in the breaking of the bread. During the Reformation, when communion began to be celebrated infrequently, the offering drifted to other parts of the service and sometimes was divorced from the memory of God’s graciousness.

Perhaps our childhood churches had good intuitions about where the offering belonged in the service of worship when they celebrated it immediately after the supper. But they had just forgotten why, so they apologized for it every Sunday as though it didn’t belong. But it does! This is a joyful response and participation in the wonderful works of our God remembered and

celebrated in the Supper.

Giving Our Best: The Labor of Our Hands; The Finest Ministry

When we look at the offering, all we see is a basket passing by and in it are checks and bills and change. So we reach in our pockets and produce the same. And when we do, our imaginations may picture little more than church ledgers and unpaid bills. But when the Israelites heaved those baskets of ripened grain into the hands of the priest, they saw first the best of their own work, the most prized of their crops, the very choicest of what they could produce. And second, they saw the food they were giving, the food that would feed the needy, and would feed the priests, and would be exchanged for needed items for their place of worship. When they gave their grain they saw the ministry that would happen because of their free gift.

We have a problem here, it’s hard to think of money in terms of quality. “Look at this fine dollar bill; I think I will give it to the Lord,” makes little sense. Money has to do, by definition, only with quantity, not quality. Written on the checks and bills are only numbers. While the basket of wheat was not far removed from the sweat and toil of planting and reapings, it takes prayer and planning and serious thought about our work to be able to say about our weekly gift placed in the basket, “I’m giving God the best of my life, the choicest I have to offer.” In many Christian traditions, the offering is a time when people also offer themselves to God anew. It is often used as an occasion for members to offer their gifts of music to the church, when solos and other special music are heard. These are profitable insights and practices to which we would do well to listen. But we need not to forget that the medium of exchange in our culture is money. We should have no ambivalence about money’s place in worship. The giving of our money to God is a spiritual worship; it can be a lavish outpouring of gratitude for what God has done. The gifts of our money can be the giving of the best fruits of our work to God.

Also, it is very difficult to see ministry in money. In fact, there has been a growing skepticism in America about donations to the churches. This reticence has to do with a general distrust of institutions. It has to do with our rugged individualism that says, “I know best what to do with my own money.” And it has to do with a kind of dualism that says money is less than

spiritual, and to talk about money at church is somehow sacrilegious. But the Israelites laid their corn at the feet of the priests and saw in it a joyful gift to the Lord, for they were able to see more directly than we the ministry that resulted. For us, it may take constant reminders to enable us to see the needy who are fed by the benevolent ministry, the grieving who find solace through the hospital chaplaincy ministry, the fellowship which is enhanced, the children who are taught, the nurture which is made easier through the maintaining of our buildings, the people who at last know the joy of a Christian community because of various missions, the people who will have the opportunity to read scripture because of the work of the World Bible Translation Center, the teens who are strengthened and exposed to straighter paths through special attention. And don't forget the priest and his family—that's me—who are clothed and fed and housed and provided for. All of this occurs through the offering! And this is not spiritual? Mundane as it appears, the offering of our money is a way for the congregation as a whole to offer itself to the world in ministry. Because the money is used for building payments and utilities and purchase of worship and education materials does not somehow taint our offering. The Gospels tell a story of a woman who bought a fabulously expensive bottle of perfume, broke it, and poured it out on Jesus' feet. "What a ridiculous waste of money," the disciples complained, "Why that should have been sold and the money given to the poor." But Jesus insisted that there is room in the kingdom even for foolish extravagance in the joyous giving for him. Our sharing together in the offering makes it

possible to join hands and watch as our individual gifts are multiplied by his hands into a lavish outpouring of ministry we could by ourselves never hope even to begin. Is it possible, as the baskets are passed, for us to begin to see the richness of ministry that comes from the sharing of our tithes and offerings?

A Celebration of Joy

The practice of the Israelites shows they considered the offering to be a time of great joy. The firstfruits were carefully reaped and laid aside in a spirit of festiveness. They were carried to the priest with thanksgiving. They were laid at the altar in a great celebration of all the good that God had done for their people. Sometimes it seems we think of the contribution more as we do of taxes, a sort of unwelcome intrusion into our lives and into our worship. But with the help of God we can come to know the great joy there is in giving freely of what we have to him, relinquishing control, placing it in the hands of others, and, knowing the great good that will result, rejoicing mightily in our gift.

The offering in our worship every Sunday says that his lavish love for us demands a response of commitment. It is one of the most active times of our worship. The offering is not to be hidden in embarrassment in a corner of our worship; it is a celebration of God's love, an outpouring of sharing toward a common ministry bigger than ourselves. It is a time when we freely recognize that all we have comes from him, and we take of the best he has given us and joyously place it into his hands. To his glory. Amen.