

Sunday March 10th, 2019

Lent I

PRAYER: O Saviour, you promised that all who cling to you will be delivered, that all who call upon you will be heard. We have clung too long to this world, O God; now we turn and reach for you. Stretch out your hand, deliver us! We have called too often upon other gods; now we turn and cry to you. Hear our prayer, Lord, and rescue us!

WORDS OF ASSURANCE: The Apostle Paul writes, “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” John writes, “If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9) Friends, in Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

OFFERTORY SENTENCE: Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless His holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not His benefits. (Psalm 103:1, 2)

PASTORAL PRAYER: O God, in whose service we find our freedom, we call upon your name with gratitude for the past and with hope for the future. Words of faith are upon our lips; songs of faith are upon our hearts. The words tell of your righteousness; the songs rejoice in your salvation. For you are the God of our ancestors, of our mothers and fathers who went down into Egypt and were enslaved by the hand of Pharaoh; who cried out to you in the land of Goshen and were heard, for you saw their affliction, their toil, their oppression, and delivered them into a land of milk and honey. And you are the God of our Saviour, our brother Jesus, who with his parents went down into Egypt and was saved from the hand of Herod; who cried out to you in the Garden of Gethsemane and was heard, for you saw his torment, his struggle, and brought him into the kingdom of bread and wine.

We are grateful, Lord; for as we retell the story of your righteousness, we participate in that saving history and make it our hope. And our need for that hope is no less than in the past. Temptation creeps into the midst of our salvation. Our ancestors, having been led into the wilderness by your hand, wandered for forty years, and were sorely tempted; indeed, while you communed with Moses on Mount Sinai, they created a golden calf and proclaimed it god. And our brother Jesus, having been led into the wilderness by your Spirit, was tempted for forty days; and when every temptation was ended, his adversary departed only until a more opportune time.

The voice of the tempter taunts us with the same words as he taunted Jesus: If you are the children of God, turn the stones to bread, and your hunger shall be satisfied! If you are children of God, seize the glory of power, and the world shall be yours! If you are children of God, throw yourself off the roof of the temple, and you shall not be hurt! The voice seduces us, Lord, sounding like yours. So, we live and die, trying to turn stones into bread, turning what we want into what we need, and believing, if we get it, that you have made it possible. We live and die, climbing the mountain, looking for more power than we have, and believing, if we find it, that you have made it happen. We live and die, leaping off the rooftops of our religion, testing the angels of your will, and believing, if we are rescued, that you have made it so.

O Lord, how little we comprehend the profanity of trying to tempt you! How little we understand the blasphemy of courting you, as if you could be won or lost; the blasphemy of negotiating with you, as if you could be bought or sold;

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the blasphemy of examining you, as if you could be judged right or wrong.

O Lord, how we deceive ourselves, believing that you play favourites, forgetting that you are lord of all; that just as you are the God of those who cried “Father!” on the cross, you are the God of those who wrongly seek another for their devotion and you are the God of those who say “Lord, Lord!” and yet do not do your will. Forgive us, Lord, for we sin. Forgive us, Lord, for we would overcome temptation. Forgive us, Lord, for you alone would we serve-you, in whom alone we find freedom.

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Deuteronomy 26:1-11
“God’s Invitation to Party.”

Some of you may be aware of the famous broadcaster named Paul Harvey, who is most often remembered for his short historical pieces on the radio, entitled “And now you know the Rest of the Story.” However, in one of his regular newscasts on November 22nd, 1995 Paul Harvey shared this insight. The *Butter Ball Turkey Company* set up a 1-800-hot line to answer consumer questions about preparing holiday turkeys.

One woman called the help line to inquire about cooking a turkey that had been in her freezer for, catch this, twenty-three years! **Yummy!** The operator went on to tell her that it might be safe, if the freezer had been kept below zero degrees the entire time. But the operator warned the woman that, even if it were safe to eat, the flavour had probably deteriorated, and she wouldn’t recommend eating it. The caller then replied, “That’s what we thought. We’ll just give it to the church.”

We laugh at such a story, but we know how accurate a situation it represents. From the time I began to get actively involved in churches, I have on many occasions given time to cleaning out stuff given to the church, or to other Christian organization like Camp Oneida, that were given by someone who wanted to simply get rid of it. Such was the case this past fall in our own First Baptist building.

Old books, old food (we see this at the food bank all the time, especially those little jam jars people get at Christmas), old furniture, and old clothing. It all seems to make its way to a church or charity. Some of it can be, thankfully, used in some way, like through a rummage sale, but a lot of it accumulates, and the church ends up, as we did this back in the fall, calling Cookson’s or some other company to haul it away.

Now there is nothing wrong with trying to find some use for our cast-off items. It is, in fact, good stewardship, as long as it doesn’t burden someone else. I was wondering about this situation while I have worked at food banks over the years. I have often sorted through bags of food that someone had given, that clearly came from a cupboard clean out. Bags that contained those little jam jars, and old packages of herbal tea.

Such recollections were even more prominent in my thoughts, as I read our Old Testament lesson. Am I, as a child of God, as quick to offer my best, as I am my leftovers? I think it is a crucial question; at least it is for me. Besides perhaps being physically challenging, that is cleaning out my closet of my unused clothes and taking them to the nearest “Value Village” bin; it doesn’t really cost me anything.

In fact, it may be of great benefit to clean out the clutter and I know that “Value Village or Sally Ann” can use my old shirts, sweaters or whatever. But when I read passages of scripture, like this one from Deuteronomy, I am confronted with the fact that God requires from me the first fruits of my life. Now what does it mean, to offer God the first fruits of my life? Well, let me give a very Canadian illustration of what it means.

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Very soon, maybe even this week, farmers in Ontario and Quebec will be beginning a special harvest. Even with heavy amounts of snow on the ground, farmers will set off with drills in hand, and make small holes in sugar maple trees, and then they will either connect those holes to a pipeline, or hang buckets under them.

This process is used to collect sap from maple trees, and then that sap is boiled down to produce maple syrup. It takes roughly 40 liters of sap to make one liter of syrup. Syrup is something all good Canadians love on their pancakes. By the way. How many of you had pancakes on Tuesday? What you may not be aware of is that the very first run of sap in the spring is the best. It often produces the lightest, and most sought-after syrup. It also commands the highest price from consumers.

As the season goes on, the syrup gets darker, until it is what is called *bud syrup*, which is almost black, and not desirable. Bud syrup is very bitter, and often tastes burnt. As a syrup producer then, according to Deuteronomy, which syrup should I offer to God; the left over “bud syrup”, which no one really wants? No, not at all! I am to offer that wonderful first run syrup; the very best syrup of the year.

In Moses’ day, the people were to offer, their best grains, best fruits, best animals to God. In our day, what do we think first fruits mean: the first part of our paycheck, the first and best part of our free time, or maybe something else you might think of? We are to be a people of first fruit; a people who give their very best.

Now, I know what some of you might be thinking right about now. Gee, if I had known we were going to get a stewardship sermon, I’d have stayed home. But here is the shocking truth; I am not really talking about money. I am talking about our response to God. Whether or not we are generous, is really just a symptom of a greater issue in our lives, and certainly a reflection on the state of our faith.

This is the first Sunday in Lent; a season about not only individual spiritual examination, but maybe more importantly, a season about corporate spiritual examination. It is a time for the church community to think, and pray, and ask God for help in building a deeper, richer relationship with him. And one of the things we are struggling with together is how and why we give our first fruits to God?

Judy Keene of Illinois had quite an insight on this point when she tells this story.

While hurrying through Chicago’s commuter train station, I had an “Aha!” moment that stopped me in my tracks. I’d just left the candy counter where I’d bought Valentine’s treats for an upcoming party a few of us were planning for our church’s single moms. Doing so took my thoughts back to a cookout the previous summer, for which I had covered the cost.

The single moms, their children, and I enjoyed a glorious day at a local sunshine drenched beach, conversing, and stuffing ourselves with burgers, chips, and all the trimmings.

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As the afternoon ended, I sat among the moms at the picnic table as they enthusiastically divided up the leftover hot dogs, sodas, and desserts. No one thought to offer me a thing. Though no one suspected it, my feelings were a little bruised. No, I didn't need the food. And most of the moms had given little thought to where the picnic spread had come from.

But the slight was significant enough that I recalled it in the train station six months later. Then it hit me! How much more slighted God must feel when, as recipients of his enormous generosity, we're reluctant to share a portion of our resources with him. Just as I didn't need the potato salad, he doesn't need our money. But he does crave our gratitude-our acknowledgement that all we have is from him.

That is, what was the basis behind the first fruit command that Moses gave the people. The Hebrew people are really big on remembering; remembering what God had done for them, because in the midst of daily struggles, they often lost sight of the bigger picture. Moses tells the people to bring their first fruits, to honour God and acknowledge what God did from Abraham through to the present day.

As they gave their gifts, they were to say, "And now, O Lord, I have brought you a token of the first fruits you have given me from the ground." Then they were to worship God and then, they were to do something we have overlooked perhaps for centuries; they were to go and celebrate; have a great big party. All of it, of course, in response to what God had done for his people.

Notice, if you will something very profound here. The people's response: this giving of first fruits, worshipping God, and having a party, was in response to what God had done for the people as a whole. This was a corporate response, not an individual response. The community of faith was to respond to God's goodness, together; despite what was going on in each individual's life.

Again, the hard truth here is that our offering of first fruits, or worship of God, and our celebration of what God has done, is never about me personally. My life maybe going through a rough patch, for a month or even years, but that never excuses us from recognizing what God has done, with our first fruits and our worship and even attending parties in his honour.

My gifts and my worship, is not about me; it is about God and what he has done for his people at First Baptist. So, if we go back to the question of first fruits, we see that what we offer to God is reflective of our appreciation for what God has done. If we under value what God has done, it will be reflected in our: stewardship, in our worship, and in our lack of celebration.

If we value what God has done: resources will never be an issue for this community, our worship will be authentic, and we will make it a priority to celebrate God's goodness. Our giving is never about what the church needs. Our worship is never about what feels right to me and our celebrations should not be felt to be an inconvenience or an imposition on my already busy schedule.

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It is not about me or even us; it is always about God. Maybe you wonder what there is to remember about God's goodness. The Apostle Paul reminds us, "Anyone who believes in him will not be disappointed". Paul also adds these words, "Anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

Jesus is cause enough for us to pour our first fruits before God, and to worship God and to bring out our party hats. If that was all God had done for this community, it would be more than enough, since we don't deserve such grace. But there is so much more to remember. Each of us is a living testimony to the grace and mercy of God, even if we don't feel like it right at this very moment.

You and I both know that there are days, perhaps far too many days, when we feel: angry, abandoned, or forgotten by God. In our human nature we are tempted to withhold our first fruits, forgo our worship, and certainly we don't feel like partying. I bet some people here today felt that even getting dressed, and dragging ourselves to this service was quite a chore. All of us have days like this.

That's why we need to remember. That is why we need to remember together. Do you remember the scriptural idea that we are the body of Christ and how each of us is a part making up the whole? In 1 Corinthians 12 the Apostle Paul speaks of all these ministries, services and gifts as having one purpose. Do you remember what it is? Verse 7 reads, "A spiritual gift is given to each of us as a means of helping the entire church."

We give our first fruits, worship, and party together, so that our collective strength and our collective faith can lift one another up. In our darkest moments, we are all here to remind ourselves of the bigger picture. That even though my life is a little rough right now, God is still working in this fellowship. We gather to live out the truth that when "one of us suffers we all suffer and when one of us is honoured we all our honoured".

Perhaps the greatest hindrance to our responding to God as we should; has to do with our knowledge of what true gratitude entails. The Masai tribe in West Africa has an unusual way of saying thank-you. Translators tell us that when the Masai express thanks, they bow, put their foreheads on the ground, and say, "My head is in the dirt."

When members of another African tribe want to express gratitude, they sit for a long time in front of the hut of the person who did the favour and literally say, "I sit on the ground before you." These Africans understand well what true thanksgiving is and why it is so difficult for us. Because, at its very core, thanksgiving is an act of humility. And humility is something we struggle with.

We don't like being at the mercy or being indebted to anyone; but we are. We are at the mercy of God and without his grace we are lost and without hope. Frankly, the sooner we come to terms with our collective need for God, the sooner we can reap the benefits of our relationship with God. All God wants from us, is our voluntary and heart felt appreciation for all that he has done for us.

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Appreciation for the enormous cost to redeem us, and to make us “adopted sons and daughters of God”, to borrow a phrase from Paul. And so, we gather our first fruits to offer to God, we do not forgo the assembling of ourselves together to worship God and we will regularly and readily make plans for parties.

Why? To show our joy at what God has done, is doing and will do in the future. God surely deserves something better than our leftovers, and we should demonstrate our faith as a community, in giving him our very best.

BENEDICTION: Christ is your shepherd, and in his presence all your deepest needs are met, your joy restored. Into the chalice of your life he pours mercy until it overflows. Go now in peace, knowing that all the days of your life you dwell in the presence of the Lord, Amen.