

## **Deuteronomy 26:1-11**

*“When you come into the land which the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance, and have taken possession of it, and live in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from your land that the Lord your God gives you, and you shall put it in a basket, and you shall go to the place which the Lord your God will choose, to make his name to dwell there. And you shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, 'I declare this day to the Lord your God that I have come into the land which the Lord swore to our fathers to give us.' Then the priest shall take the basket from your hand, and set it down before the altar of the Lord your God. "And you shall make response before the Lord your God, 'A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. Then we cried to the Lord the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And behold; now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which thou, O Lord, hast given me.' And you shall set it down before the Lord your God, and worship before the Lord your God; and you shall rejoice in all the good which the Lord your God has given to you and to your house, you, and the Levite, and the sojourner who is among you.”*

As Christian people we will come together this Thursday to observe a time-honored American tradition. Some of us will gather here in Landrum together on Wednesday to worship together for Thanksgiving. I would like to begin this morning's sermon by telling you a story which could be seen un-American and non-Christian. It's possible that, if I had not said anything about it, you might have listened to this story and not have noticed anything unusual. In fact, even though I've told you, it may still be difficult for you to detect what it is that's un-American and non-Christian about this story. So listen closely to see if you can figure it out. Are you ready?

It was that time of year again. It was thanksgiving time. Farmers had finished the harvest. Businesses and schools had closed for the break. Not all, but most people had taken time off from work. After all, it was a national holiday. In keeping with tradition, there would be a special worship service, just like there was every year. In addition to all the traveling and all the special preparations, people would once again have the opportunity to worship. This story is about three very religious people who lived in a rural community. It is a story about three people who chose to attend the annual thanksgiving worship service. Their names are Liz, Sam and Joe.

They all live in the country and each of them is involved in farming. However, each of them has his own view of what it means to be “thankful” for the harvest that is now out of the field and in the barns. Liz does not actually do farming work herself. She is married to a farmer. Her husband farms a very large farm. This past year they did very well. It was a bumper crop for them. Liz and her husband are very happy about it. As faithful worshippers, they will tithe a full ten percent of everything that they received from the harvest. Considering the size of this year's crop, giving away ten percent means giving away a lot, but they do not mind. Even after giving so much in their offering, they will still have enough to make them quite wealthy and, for that, they are thankful.

Sam also farms. He farms a much smaller farm than Liz's husband does. For whatever reason, Sam's crop was not too good this year. Sam's barn is pretty small to begin with, but, even so, his harvest did not come close to filling it. Nonetheless, Sam is also faithful in giving his tithe every year. Discouraged as he is by how little he received from the land, he too plans to attend the special worship service. He will offer his tithe and give thanks for what crops he does have.

Finally there is Joe. Joe is a very young farmer. Some of his friends tease him about being more of a nature lover than a farmer. He sometimes goes out to his field and just looks at the earth. He stands in awe as he watches the miracle of planted seeds sprouting from the ground. As Joe brings his tithe to the special worship service, he does so conscious of the special wonder that is bound up in the process of planting and harvesting. Each of the three people approaches the worship service with a little different view of thankfulness. Liz is “happy thankful.” Sam is “discouraged thankful.” Joe is “awe-struck thankful.” Yet, even though their viewpoints vary somewhat, they each attend the thanksgiving worship service with the same thing in mind. Each goes to worship expecting it to be a time to offer God their thanks and their tithe. However, when they actually get to the worship, they discover that, this year, there's more going on, much more. This worship service turns out to be only a time for them to give their offering and speak a prayer of thanks. This year's worship now includes: “The Creed” and that changes everything. Attending this thanksgiving worship, Liz, Sam and Joe each discover that there is far more going on than they had realized.

That's the story. Was it as bad as I led you to expect, or did it actually seem like a fairly nice story to you? I would guess that for most if not all of you this story probably sounded like a story about some pretty nice, fairly generous, "church-going" people. If you had a hard time figuring out what was so non-Christian and so un-American about it, allow me to let you in on the secret. You see, "The Creed" that was said in the worship service was not the Apostles' Creed. Nor was it the Nicene Creed or the Athanasian Creed or any other Christian creed. In fact, Liz, Sam and Joe were not attending a Christian worship service at all. They were attending a harvest time, thanksgiving worship service all right, but it had nothing to do with our American Thanksgiving.

The three worshippers in the story were not even Americans. None of them lived anywhere near America. Neither did they worship in a time that was anywhere near the 20th century. Although it may have sounded like it was a story about an American Thanksgiving worship service, much like the service we will have on Wednesday evening, it was actually a story about three Hebrew people attending the "Feast of First Fruits" in Jerusalem, centuries before the birth of Christ.

This event could not possibly be Christian and it certainly was not an American tradition. Nevertheless, the 26th chapter of Deuteronomy, the chapter which prescribes the worship for this ancient Hebrew festival, is our passage for this our Thanksgiving sermon. What could this text possibly have to say to our situation today?

The “Feast of First Fruits,” described in our text, is also called by other names in Scripture. It is sometimes called “The Feast of Harvest,” and sometimes “The Feast of Weeks.” The date of the festival was set by counting seven weeks from the time harvest began, or as Scripture puts it, “*when the sickle was put to the standing grain.*” Since it was celebrated on the 50th day after the beginning of the harvest, it was later given the name “Pentecost,” since the Greek word *pentacosta* actually means 50. It is the same harvest festival that was taking place when the Holy Spirit came to the disciples and others in the second chapter of the book of Acts.

The story with which I began with is a story about people attending this “Feast of the First Fruits.” Liz, Sam and Joe are just nicknames given to worshippers who would probably have gone by the such Hebrew names like Elizabeth, Samuel and Joseph.

The particular characters, along with their scenarios, are just something made up for the story, but the worship service described was not made up. After the Hebrews finished the harvest each year, people took off work and traveled to Jerusalem to give a tithe of their crops. The Bible says the thanksgiving ceremony consisted of putting the first fruits of one's harvest in a basket and then going to the central sanctuary to offer it before Yahweh. Once that was done, this ancient agricultural ceremony of first fruits was ended. Or we should probably say, that is how it worked each year until Moses announced to the people that now there was to be something more involved in the ceremony. That "something more" was a creed that the people were to memorize and repeat to the priests when the first fruits were offered. This creed, this statement of belief, consisted of a brief history of what God had done for them. What is happening in our text is that Moses is taking a perfectly fine ceremony of thanksgiving, and is saying to the people: "There's more! Much more!"

The message to the people is that now the harvest festival is to be **NOT** only about giving thanks for material things. It is also to be a time for remembering who God is, and there's even more. It is also to be a time to

discover who they themselves are as a people in relationship with this God. It turns out that Moses intends for the whole thing to be more than just an expression of thankfulness for material blessings. In our text we read how Moses, the writer of Deuteronomy, tells the people to recite one of the most ancient of all stories. It is a brief but dramatic history of what God had done for the people. It tells how God delivered the people from bondage in Egypt and how God later gave them the Promised Land. When we read this creed carefully we discover that the word choices used in the creed are very significant.

The creed begins, “*A wandering Aramean (i.e. Jacob) was my ancestor.*” It starts by the speaker looking back into the past from their vantage point in the present, but as the creed continues the speaker chooses words that eliminate the distance between the past and the present. When talking about their ancestors’ time of bondage, the worshipper does not say, “*When the Egyptians treated them harshly and afflicted them ...*” Instead, the worshipper says, “*When the Egyptians treated **us** harshly and afflicted **us** ...*”

The creed moves from being simply a record of history about someone else to becoming the worshipper's own story. It becomes their own story; they speak as if they were actually present when it all happened. "*The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand.*" It becomes more than just a story, more than just a creed. It becomes a personal story, a personal creed, a statement of personal belief born out of first-hand experience. The instructions to include this record of the history of God's mighty acts for the worshipper makes the first fruits ceremony quite a bit more than just an expression of thankfulness for material blessings.

Now, this ancient text, this set of instructions given to people living thousands of years ago, this set of instructions telling them how to properly observe the "Feast of First Fruits" in the Jerusalem temple, is our text for a contemporary American Thanksgiving service. It's rather amazing when you think about it. Yet, as strange as it might seem at first, it's actually quite a wonderful text for American Christians to be reading on our national holiday of Thanksgiving. It is a good text for this occasion because it takes a perfectly fine holiday and says: There's more!

Let me be clear in saying that I believe that Thanksgiving Day in this country is indeed a perfectly good holiday. It is good for us as a country to reflect on our national history. It is a good thing to teach our children about the pilgrims thanking God in a meal celebrating the harvest. It's good that people throughout this country are remembering and giving thanks for all God's blessings to them. Some, like Liz in the story, have received much and it is good for them to offer God their word of thanks. Others, like Sam, may be discouraged that they have less than their neighbor, but their words of thanks to God for what they do have are no less important. Even the smallest blessing is a gift which merits our thanks.

This day can also serve as an occasion for us to pause, like Joe, and reflect on the wonder and miraculous glory that is a part of every gift that we experience in and through God's creation. Thanksgiving Day is a perfectly good holiday for our country just as the "Feast of First Fruits" was a perfectly good holiday for the children of Israel. Because of that, this text is a tremendous text for this day because it does for us exactly what it did for the Hebrew people centuries ago. It takes a perfectly fine holiday and says: "There's more! Much more!" It may be non-American and pre-Christian, but

this text, concerning a thanksgiving celebration, can remind American Christians that Thanksgiving is not only a time to remember all God's material gifts to us. It is also a time to remember who God is and who we are as a people who have been brought into a relationship with that God. If this text does that for us, that is definitely quite a bit more than a simple nod of the head while saying grace before devouring a turkey dinner. When Moses included the creed in the first fruits celebration he was including a powerful piece of history. Focusing on what God had done, in addition to merely thanking God for the gift of material blessings, enabled the people to perceive the much wider wealth of God's goodness toward them. Yes, a loving God had provided the miracle of growth and harvest so the people could eat and live, but there was more -- much more. This same God had also delivered them from bondage in Egypt and had given them the freedom and prosperity of the Promised Land.

We have been delivered from the bondage of sin and we have been given the peace and joy that comes to us in Christ. Moses calls us to use our Thanksgiving Day worship as a time to acknowledge far more than merely

our thankfulness for God's material blessings to us. It is a call to reflect on the full story of God's action in history and our relationship with Him.

The creeds of God's church today, the Creeds we say each week, should acknowledge the glorious history of the Creator who brought us and all things into being; they should acknowledge Jesus Christ who recreated us with the gift of new life and the forgiveness of our sins; and they should acknowledge the Spirit, the "giver of life," who renews and sustains us through our baptism. Unfortunately, for most it's just words which have been memorized and repeated from nothing more than rote.

Even though the American story of the pilgrims' thankfulness to God for their first harvest is an important part of our Thanksgiving Day tradition, there is definitely more. The story of the first Thanksgiving is a good story in our nation's history, but "the best" Thanksgiving story is the story of what God has done in the history of mankind, and the best part of "the best" story is that it is our story.

It is a story that tells us who we are by telling us "whose" we are. As American Christians and citizens of this country it is good for us to recall the history of the first Thanksgiving Day observed by early American settlers and

it is good to speak our own thankfulness to God for all the blessings we enjoy in this land. It is good for us to give thanks whether we feel we have been given a lot or a little. But there's more. As citizens of God's kingdom we also need to recall the history of God's deliverance. It is in the record of God's loving acts as our Creator, Christ and Spirit.

In the history of God's loving action, which is recorded in the church's creeds of today, we should remember the act of God's love for us in the story of Jesus Christ. His story is the climax of all history. His story is the best history, for Americans and for everyone.<sup>i</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Stepping Inside, Thomas G. Rogers, CSS Publishing Company, 1994, 0-7880-0047-0