SERMON TITLE: "Seek Ye First: First Fruits"
SERMON TEXT: Deuteronomy 26:1-11, 16-19
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: October 17, 2021, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

I spent three days this past week doing jury duty in a United Methodist Church clergy trial. The process began on Monday morning, when the presiding bishop from a southeastern state called us to order. There were 35 of us clergy from our Mountain Sky Conference who had been summoned to the Zoom meeting. Some potential jurors were excused for various reasons. The names of the rest of us were put on slips of paper and drawn out. Thirteen jurors plus two alternates were needed. I was called as juror #12.

Before and after the jury was narrowed down, the presiding bishop told us that what we were doing was a sacred duty that we must take very seriously. He emphasized that serving in the trial over the next few days had to be our first priority. He urged us to set aside all other distractions. Our calendars had to be cleared of congregational and personal concerns. We had to give our full attention to the matters at hand. We were not to spend time checking our email, answering phone calls, or writing our sermons. For most of three days, we had to keep our eyes on the computer screen and our ears listening to the words that were spoken. Other matters would have to take a back seat. Arriving at a just outcome for the clergyperson and for the United Methodist Church had to be our first priority.

Even though we weren't supposed to be planning our sermons, I couldn't help but think how that fit into our stewardship theme of seeking first God's kingdom and righteousness. As we heard last Sunday, Jesus taught that—if we seek God first, if we give God priority—then God will provide and help us manage the other needs of life.

Today's scripture lesson comes from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy. There, in chapter 26, we read about God's expectations for the Hebrew people to make an offering of the first

fruits of their harvest. I invite you to look attentively at these verses with me. Let's think about why we, even today, should offer to God our first fruits.

1—ALL WE HAVE COMES FROM A GENEROUS GOD

The entire book of Deuteronomy is written as the instructions of Moses to the Hebrew people just before they would cross over the Jordan River into the Promised Land. Moses himself didn't make that crossing. He died before they got there. The important work that God called Moses to do was rescuing the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt, leading them to freedom through the Red Sea, helping them survive in the wilderness for 40 years, and bringing them the wisdom of God in the form of many laws and instructions. All that was in preparation for them to start fresh, and to have the best possible life in the land of Canaan, once they were ready to cross over the Jordan River.

Believing that their life would be much improved in that new land of milk and honey, Moses instructed them, in Deuteronomy 26, that they should take first fruits from their harvest to God's dwelling and offer them to the priest. These first fruit offerings would be signs of appreciation and gratitude. They would be an acknowledgement that all that the Hebrews had was a gift from their generous God.

In case the Hebrew people didn't immediately perceive what Moses was talking about, Moses spelled it out in detail. Beginning in verse five, we see the creed of remembrance that the Hebrews were supposed to recite as they gave their offerings. This recitation went all the way back to their ancestor Abraham, who was the wandering Aramean. When there was a famine, Abraham's descendants migrated to Egypt, where they found sufficient food, and became a great population. When the Egyptians began to treat them harshly, the Hebrews suffered in slavery with affliction and toil. But God heard their cries for deliverance. Calling Moses to be their leader, God brought the Hebrew people out of Egypt with a powerful arm, and with signs and wonders. And, now, God had brought them here, where they were about to cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land. They soon would

live in a land of their own, in a place where food grew bountifully, and where they could worship God in gratitude. Moses wanted his Hebrew people to always remember and always acknowledge that all they possessed had come from their generous God.

Even if we have never been hungry or had to wander in a wilderness, I trust that we who are here in this sanctuary or watching this service over Facebook Live can also agree that all we have comes from our generous God. Our Christian and familial heritage, our education, what we have inherited materially and morally, the natural resources of the land, the structures of our society that protect us, the opportunities that give us hope--all these are blessings that come to us from the generosity of God. We may have put in our 40 or more hours of labor per week, but we know that we didn't make all the good things of life happen on our own. So much of what we have and are was a gift. Like the ancient Hebrews, we are motivated to offer our first fruits because we know that all we have comes from our generous God.

2—OBEDIENCE TO THE LAWS IS WHAT GOD EXPECTS IN RESPONSE

A second reason why we would offer our first fruits to God is that God expects obedience to these laws and principles. Over and over again, Moses made it clear to his people that God was kind and generous, but God also expected the people's faithful response. We see this spelled out in verses 16-19. Moses told his people that the Lord had agreed to be their God, that the Hebrews would be God's treasured and holy people, and that God would set them high above all nations. These were divine promises. But, in return, the Hebrews had to obey God's commandments.

I'm sure Moses was speaking here of all the commandments, not just the first fruits commandment that's named in this chapter. But, for sure, Moses intended *this commandment—t*o give their first fruits offerings. As the people came into their new land and made it their new home, and as they harvested their first food, they immediately needed to make sure that their priorities were right. This wasn't an optional suggestion, that they could wait and see how things turned out and then decide.

They weren't supposed to delay until their houses were built and their storage cellars were full. They weren't supposed to stall until they had three years or seven years' worth of harvest experiences so they would know how much they could spare year in and year out. No, they weren't supposed to ponder or hedge their bets to see if they could come up with a wiser strategy than God did.

According to Moses in Deuteronomy 26, God had already decided this matter for them. This was a non-negotiable requirement from the get-go. For the Hebrews to be in this covenant relationship with God, for them to have the kind of life they desired and that God wanted for them, they had to put things in order from the very beginning. They had to acknowledge God first.

Last Sunday, when David Barron gave his stewardship talk, he told how he and Annette have always made a habit of paying their pledge to the church before they pay any of their other bills. That's the kind of first fruits Moses was talking about. God wants us to put God in first place. Obviously, if we've already racked up a bunch of debts, we're going to have to pay them off. But before we create any more obligations against our income, we need to stop and realize that our relationship with God is dependent on our obedience to this commandment. Not just with our hearts and our words, but also with our financial assets, God has to come first.

I know that lots of us, maybe all of us, don't like to be told what to do. We don't like it when we feel forced to do something. We chafe against authorities. We rebel against institutions and rules that don't seem to flex and bend. But, honestly, sometimes it's just a whole lot easier to accept that God really does know what's best for us. Sometimes it's a whole lot healthier for us to submit to God's holy wisdom that has come down to us over centuries and millennia.

The Bible is full of stories of what happened to the Hebrew people when they didn't obey God's commandments. When they thought they knew a better way, they repeatedly brought misery on themselves. The exile into Babylon was a huge negative consequence for their disobedience. Those years in captivity proved that they shouldn't have been putting other gods ahead of the one true God

who had rescued them from slavery and brought them into the Promised Land. God expects us to obey this first fruits commandment to put God first because that's what's best for us. It's that simple. God expects us to obey this commandment. God expects us to give our first fruits.

CONCLUSION

When I was a younger adult, there were definitely times when my paycheck couldn't come soon enough to pay for rent, utilities, car payment, and student loans. Fortunately, though, I don't ever remember going hungry.

I'm guessing that most of us have never been so hungry that we could barely wait for the first fruits of harvest. But, back in the year 2000, I witnessed that in the country of Nicaragua. I was there on a mission trip. Our Mission Team was helping to build 20' x 20' brick houses out in a mountain village. We could see the villagers' corn growing on the steep hillsides. The pastors who were working with us told us that their people were eagerly awaiting the maturation of the corn. Two years earlier, Hurricane Mitch had destroyed their homes and their food sources. The community hadn't recovered yet, and they were very hungry. I don't know how those folks responded to this instruction in Deuteronomy 26 to give their first fruits to God. Maybe they needed to eat before they even had the strength to carry their offerings to the church. If that was the case, I'm sure God understood.

Fortunately, we aren't that desperate. Our bellies have been more than full. We have been blessed by God over and over again. So it's time now for us to accept this teaching of Moses. Let's seek God's kingdom and righteousness first. Because of God's generosity and because of God's command, let's offer to God our first fruits.