

The Story Behind our Gifts

Deuteronomy 26:1–11

26 When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, “Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us.” When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, you shall make this response before the LORD your God: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me.” You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.

Israel is about to step through the threshold into the promised land. They have slogged through the wilderness for forty years. They are on the precipice of a new era. The first thing they are commanded to do, once they get the boxes unpacked and their crops planted, is to offer the first fruits of their crops back to God. And notice: as the priest takes the basket of their offerings, they are commanded to respond in liturgical fashion by saying: “There was an Aramean who migrated to Egypt. The family started small, but it grew into a nation. Then came the days when we were oppressed by inhumane policies. We cried out to God and God freed us, guided us, and here we are.” Do you hear what’s happening? They are telling their story.

The offering of our gifts is almost always connected to a story. Ever wonder why Laura Spedding is so invested in the CROP walk every year? Or why Sue Baker takes blood pressure readings every month? Or why the choir shows up week after week to sing? There are rich, beautiful stories there. And I bet if we were to listen deeply, we would find God’s story in their story as well.

If someone asked me why I’m invested here I would recall the time when I was looking for a church to serve. Many interested churches asked if I would be willing to lead them having

conversations about whether or not to affirm the LGBTQ community. I told them no, because if they decided NOT to be an open and affirming place then I couldn't stay there. Then it caught me by surprise to learn that in North Carolina, of all places, there was a little church that had been affirming the beautiful people of the LGBTQ community since the mid 90's. When I got here of course I learned more stories. Stories shaped by glory and wilderness. Stories of resilient hope and tragic loss. Stories where Janet Rolison brings her knitting gear teaching our children how to knit after worship. And it hooks me. Stories how Sheila's relationship with Calvin and Jackson help them grow into little rock stars. And it hooks me. Where, as we walked in PRIDE yesterday, listening to God's people—our people--give thanks for our presence in the community, we were reminded of a story about why we do what we do. Why the song keeps going. And it hooks me.

We need to share these stories alongside a season of grateful giving. If someone asked you the question, "Why do you give your gifts?" what would be your story be? And I bet if we were to listen to these stories deep enough we wouldn't only find our story, but we would find God's story as well.