

“Why Give?”

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Deuteronomy 26:10-13

The passage we'll be looking at today comes from a time after the Israelite people had been freed from slavery in Egypt and were about to settle into their homeland.

This passage is about living into a pattern of new life as a community centered in God. They needed rigorous structures in order to remind themselves of who they were and who their God was.

Perhaps we need some of that as well. Think about your need for sanity and clarity amid the craziness of your life with all the requests for your time and energy. It's easy to get wrapped up in our work, our family, raising kids, changing diapers, and everything else.

We need markers along the way to help ground us and raise our eyes above the craziness.

This is what the people thousands of years ago also needed and in part why we have a passage like the one I will read in a minute from an old book called Deuteronomy.

The word deuteronomy translated from the Greek means literally “second law.” The first law was the Ten Commandments. Moses received these on stone tablets from God up on the mountain in the desert.

This “second law” was a series of laws that Moses gave to the people to help form the boundaries of their community, solidify their nation's identity, and create a focused spiritual life.

They needed this because their identity had been at risk while they were enslaved in Egypt. It was only by God's grace that they survived as an oppressed people for hundreds of years.

Here is the setting for the passage: The Israelites, after being freed from slavery in Egypt, were to enter a new land that God would give them. God through Moses had been giving them rituals to help focus them on God's provision and love.

Once they settled in their new land, Moses encouraged them never to forget how their livelihood had been provided through the generosity of strangers because they lived without a land of their own.

Because others and indeed God had been generous to them, they needed to also be generous to others who did not have land or a home. Listen to what it says in Deuteronomy.

READ DEUTERONOMY 26:10-13

The Israelites were to take the first fruits of the land, 10% of their crops, and give them to the priests, resident aliens, orphans, and widows.

It refers to giving a tithe here. A tithe is literally 10% of one's crop or 10% of one's income.

Why is this story important?

First of all, passages like this have set the standard for how much the Church today encourages people to give — 10% of each family's income, to support those most in need in the community. This often translates to 10% of income given to their church, which then works together to support those in need.

Let's also think about what it meant to live off the land in those days. It is still this way today in certain parts of the world. If you were a crop farmer, you had a long process before harvest. You had to prepare the soil in the field by loosening the soil and digging it up. In the process, you had to get rid

of rocks, weeds, and plants you didn't want. This took a lot of time and effort because you didn't have tools more than a simple shovel, or a donkey drawn cultivator like on the cover of this morning's program.

Then of course you would dig rows and plant seeds, and tend the field, weed it, water it, protect it from wild animals, and watch the plants grow.

When harvest time came, you would be longing to reap what you had sown in order to provide food for your family to live on. By the harvest time, you probably had run out of last year's crop and perhaps had skipped some meals and were getting hungry.

At this point, God is leading them to take the first fruits from the harvest and give them away to bless others who were in need. This was a stark reminder of two very specific priorities. 1. This crop is a gift from God, and I need to be responsible with it, and 2. Others who are in need come first!

These first fruits were given so that those who had no other means, might have enough to eat: the priests, resident aliens, orphans, and widows. In their society, these are specific groups of people who relied on the generosity of others

for their livelihood. Let's look at each.

The **priests** were a group of people who did not have a job that provided food to eat. Their responsibility was wrapped up in religious duties in the temple including purification rituals, sacrifices, and other practices on behalf of the people. They had no other way to eat except when others provided for them.

Orphans were the children of parents who had died, often in war with the surrounding nations. Orphans were too young to live on their own and would sometimes live with relatives, but always depended on the generosity of others to live. God was clear that orphans needed to be cared for by the community.

Widows were like the orphans in that their livelihood had been cut off when their husbands died, again most often from war. In the patriarchal society in which they lived, women gained standing and a place in society by way of their husband. Without a husband, they risked a loss of standing, respect, and even provision.

Widows also did not often have the means to make income and relied on others to provide for them, but even if they were wealthy, their

standing in society was at risk because they were viewed as less.

So, Moses gave them laws and practices that provided for the care of widows as a very vulnerable group of people. The tithe support was one of these.

Lastly, this passage mentions that their tithe was to support "**resident aliens.**" In our day, we call these people: **refugees, immigrants, and asylum seekers** — people who have fled their home in another country seeking shelter, safety, and provision to sustain their life in another place. These people would have no family, no roots, no jobs, and most importantly no land to farm in the new land.

All of these groups (priests, orphans, widows, and resident aliens) did not have direct access to cultivate the land and provide sustenance for life. As a result, they relied on the generosity of others who cultivated the land and grew crops.

The abundance that came from the land and supported their life was understood as the goodness of God's blessing. This blessing was to be shared with all members of the community — that everyone might have enough and be blessed.

Nobody was ever free to ignore the people who lacked the necessities of life.

God led them to take care of those most in need among them in their community as an act of justice even before addressing their own needs. This was the pattern for life that God had given them.

This same message was reaffirmed in Jesus' time when God's generous blessing found in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus offered forgiveness to all people regardless of their birth place, their tribe, their creed, or tradition — Jew or Gentile — there was no exclusion.

How does this compare with our current world where people are praised for putting themselves and their own interests first — and perhaps giving what is leftover to those in need?

How does this message of justice relate with our current hot debate over immigration at the southern border? Are we organized to offer our best to those most in need who are fleeing treacherous situations in their homeland?

This is not as much a political issue, but a spiritual one. This is a moral issue, a justice issue, and a humanitarian issue.

Is the situation complex?
Certainly, but why crisis is ever simple and easy?

Passages like this one from Deuteronomy and many others support the notion that God calls the Church as a first priority to stand up for, support, and care for those most in need: the ones who are without a home, without resources, without food, without protection.

So, the mandate is there. The priority is there. Is our action?

We take offerings each week to support this congregation's mission. We work to align our dollars with our Biblical mandate to care for those most in need, be they refugees and asylum seekers, or the single parents struggling to balance the pressures of life and parenthood, or those who are lonely, disenfranchised, and marginalized like those identifying as LGBTQ, or those with addictions who daily face life on the level of survival.

God clearly calls us to give our best: the first fruits of our time, our resources, and our money for the benefit of others.

Are we only giving what is left over after we have kept the best for ourselves?