

May 13, 2018

Lesson 11: Bringing First Fruits

Scripture: Leviticus 23: 9-14, 22

Context:

Our series continues to focus on being generous to God by looking at the book of Leviticus. The book of Leviticus is a book of instruction for both Israelite people and the priests who guided them. When reading Leviticus we are to imagine a world that is still figuring out rules, regulations, and how society is to function. While a majority of the text may read as textbook for priests with all of its instructions, it is also to be read as texts the Israelites used for daily living. The book is one addressed to all people of Israel with its objective emphasizing the abiding importance of the priestly-congregational partnership that holds the community of faith together and the world it serves with God's will at the center.¹ The book is to help the Israelites on their journey as God's people.

The book can be divided into two parts with the first sixteen chapters discussing the priests and their roles. The second part of the book covers chapters seventeen through twenty-seven, discussing the Holiness Code and instructions for the laity primarily. The text for today addresses the ceremonial aspect for laity when it comes to the holy days in the calendar year. In Leviticus, there are six festivals for the Israelites, three in the spring and three in the fall.² The one for today focuses on one in the spring, the First Fruits festival.³ As an agricultural society, the liturgical calendar for the Israelites follows the cycles of planting and harvesting with stops for reflection on God's design for the world.⁴ On the First Fruits day, the Israelites are to bring up the first bundle of the harvest to the priest along with a lamb as a burnt offering and wine. There is to be no eating until this offering has been made. Only when the first bundle has been blessed can the Israelites fully eat and reap in the fruits of their labor.

The last verse of today's line comes from the festival that is to follow seven weeks after the First Fruit, the Festival of Weeks. As part of this festival, there is a celebration of the harvest. But there is also a practical application. As they harvest, the Israelites are not to go to the edge of their field and go behind after the first harvest of the land. They are to leave items for the immigrants and the poor. With great blessing comes great responsibility. As the people celebrate the goodness of God around them, they are also encouraged to be faithful stewards, sharing those blessings and the land that God has given them.

Application:

From anyone that comes from an agricultural background, this text hits home base. Here we have the Israelites hearing from God about giving the first of what they

¹ Samuel E. Balentine, "Leviticus," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press; Louisville, KY 2002), 8.

² *Ibid.*, 172.

³ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁴ *Ibid.* 175.

have received in thanksgiving. Giving the “first fruit” is a sign of good will and thanksgiving. It is also a prayer for continued blessings upon a person or people.

When we read this text we are reminded of the importance of giving to God both our first and best. For those who receive paychecks, this reminds us that a portion of our income is to go to God through the church. As we give to the church we are thanking God for what we have been given. There are some who like to put it in an envelope marked and then proudly place it in the offering plate. For me, I like to give electronically. As I look at the added income added to my bank account, I go to my church’s website and for a second think about the ministries that this money could go towards. I look at my fridge with all my reminders from the church and think about all the people who love to do ministry. I look at the pictures around my house and remember Birmingham-Southern, a United Methodist school that helped prepare me for ministry and how because someone dropped a check in the plate, I was able to receive scholarships through apportionments. I say a little prayer and then I give my tithe for that month. For me, it is spiritual experience. It’s a little different than the dramatic scene found in Leviticus with a priest and a farmer walking up with the first of the harvest, but it is still a moment of giving the first fruit back to God. What ways do you like to give your offering to God? What crosses your mind when you write the check, click the button, or swipe the card?

The second thing we glean from this text is that we are not to be greedy with our harvest and what we receive. As we learn from the text, everything, especially the land is a gift that is given to humanity. Nothing is owned by humanity; that is something that we have created for our own purposes and identity. According to the ritual festival in Leviticus, there was a special designation and offering for those who were on the margins. When it came to the land and harvesting, the people were to remember that this land was not their own. The community had a mandate from God to remember those who would be in need of food and that the land was a gift to them. As such, they were to share the fruits of the land including the poor and the immigrant. This text reminds us that when there are people in need our job is not to scoff at them, judge them, or push them off. In a time where there seems to be more rhetoric about immigrants who “ruin” countries and an xenophobic push especially in American society, we would do well to revisit this text and remember that God calls us to treat the stranger differently. We are called to welcome and see them as our neighbors in the land that God has given all people. We are called to see the immigrant as brothers and sisters in Christ and as neighbors with whom God has called us to share life.

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