

STEWARDSHIP SUNDAY

April 18/19, 2009

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

“You Shall Make Response”

In today's Old Testament lesson, Moses, inspired by God, prescribes how the people of Israel are to respond to the grace of God in bringing them into the Promised Land. They are, he says, to give God their first fruits and tithes. It is a fitting response since it reminds them that God is their God and that they are to give Him the top priority in their lives. Remember, the Ten Commandments that God gave to them after leading them out of bondage in Egypt and bringing them to Mt. Sinai? The first thing He commanded them was to have no other gods before Him. Luther explained that this simply means that “we should, fear, love and trust in God above all else.” But why should we have no other gods? Why should we fear, love and trust in God above all else? Is it because God said so? Well, yes, but it's more than that. Giving God the top priority in life is what God's people do – it is the response of faith to God's action of grace.

For the Israelites, God's action involved making them a people when they were no people and leading them out of bondage into the Promised Land. In His mercy, He made them what they were – His people. And even when they were in bondage in Egypt He didn't forget them. In His mercy and in His time He delivered them as Moses said, “with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders.” And He brought them into the land He promised – a land “flowing with milk and honey.” It is because of this action that His people are called to respond by bringing Him the first fruits and tithes of that very land. After all, God gave it to them in the first place and, in the end, what they were called to give Him was only a small part of what He had given them and what He would continue to give them. But even though it was a small part, it was an important part – it was the first part. God didn't need what Israel would give Him – in fact, they needed to give it. They needed to give it because they needed to be reminded again and again, indeed every time they gave an offering and/or a tithe that God was their God and that they were His people and, as such, they were called again and again to give Him first place in their lives.

Jesus gave God the first fruits and tithes of His life. He truly feared, loved, and trusted in God above all else when no one else could or did. And because He did, He remained faithful to God throughout his life and ministry, faithful even unto death. And because He was faithful, God accepted the offering of His life for the sins of the world and He made that acceptance known through His resurrection. In all of this, Jesus was the true Israel, doing for us and for all that which we cannot and do not do for ourselves – having no other gods before the true God.

And now, in Christ, you and I, like the Israelites have been chosen to be God's people as well – chosen not because of our own merit but chosen by the grace of God. He chose us in our baptism and He made us a people when we were no people. He brought us out of

bondage too – bondage to sin, death and the devil – “with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders” through the life and ministry, the suffering and death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And, in that, we too have been brought into the Promised Land of God’s Kingdom – a land flowing with the milk and honey of God’s forgiveness and life and salvation. All of this is God’s action.

What then is our response? According to the LC-MS website, stewardship is defined as “the free and joyous activity of the child of God and God’s family, the church, in managing all of life and life’s resources for God’s purposes.” As we consider all that God has done for us, the Holy Spirit moves us and equips us through Word and Sacrament to respond with that free and joyous activity of managing all of life and life’s resources for God’s purposes to His glory and honor and for the well-being of our fellowman.

The Biblical principles of that stewardship are these:

1. God’s stewards are God’s stewards. We are not our own, we were bought with a price. We belong to God.
2. God’s stewards are managers, not owners. Even though we tend to think of all that we are and have as ours, in the end, it isn’t. It’s God’s. He has simply entrusted us with what we are and have and given us the privilege of managing it all for Him.
3. God’s stewards are saints and sinners. We are not perfect. Far from it. We are in constant need of God’s forgiveness which He gives to us freely in the name of and for the sake of Jesus. But with that forgiveness comes power, power to grow in our stewardship.
4. God’s stewards are uniquely singular, yet profoundly plural. While each of us is called to that free and joyous response individually, we do so together, as His people, especially as His people in this place.
5. God’s stewards are in the world but not of the world. While we live in the same world that everyone else does, we live in it with a different perspective and a different understanding of who we are and what we’re all about.
6. God’s stewards are loved and loving. Our stewardship grows out of God’s love for us and is expressed in our love for others.
7. God’s stewards are served and serving. God serves us through Word and Sacrament so that we may be able to serve others in Christ’s name.
8. God’s stewards live with an awareness of the present and future, of time and eternity. We live out our lives and our calling within the framework of what is both truly important and truly eternal.

These principles will be published in the bulletin and will be the subject of our ministry moments over the next number of weeks. I pray that we may take them to heart and live them out in our day-to-day lives as we grow, both individually and collectively, in giving God the first fruits and tithes of our lives. In Jesus’ name. Amen.