

“First Fruits”
Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Pastor Liz Miller
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Sometimes people ask me what I do all week as a pastor once worship is over. The shortest and most honest answer I can give is: meetings. I meet with staff, committees, ministry teams, clergy colleagues, church members with questions, church members with concerns, new folks, old folks, young folks, and everyone in between. I won't admit this out loud too often, but meetings are one of my favorite parts of ministry. It's where I get to connect with people individually or in small groups. Even when there are agendas, the conversations are often unexpected. We hash out problems, we dream up new ideas for the church, and we share pieces of our lives together around conference tables and on Zoom screens. So if you ever send me a meeting request and are tempted to add something like, “I'm sorry to bother you BUT” or “I understand if you don't have time...” or something that makes it seem like having a meeting is an imposition, just edit that right out of your email. Meetings are ministry, and I count on you all and our meetings to bring that ministry to life.

In fact, one of the ways I reflect on my past week is to look at the calendar to remember what meetings I had. I think about which meetings were challenging and what that tells me. I think about which meetings were joyful and what that reminds me of. I think about which meetings had nothing to do about the business agenda and everything to do with the personal stories that were exchanged and I am drawn into gratitude.

There are some meetings where the stories that are told and the business agenda are one and the same. Those are my favorite meetings. I witnessed a meeting like that this week when

the Tithing Team invited the congregation to hear how they intended to give away Edgewood's money this year. The Tithing Team is one of the most fun committees to be on because their whole job is to give away money. And not just a little bit money, they get to give away approximately \$36,000 or 10% of our pledge income each year.

At the meeting, we heard about over 30 organizations that were receiving funding from Edgewood. We are a church with deep commitments to justice and a big heart for service - we give to so many organizations because it represents the diversity and breadth of commitments our congregation has taken on. We could make a big impact on a few organizations if we chose, but instead the list of organizations paints a picture of what Edgewood members are passionate about - many of the organizations are ones where members are involved or have benefited from their resources. They represent so much more than a financial check at the end of the year.

At the meeting, we heard about two new projects we are supporting this year, both receiving our biggest donations at \$2,000 each. We are supporting the Green Energy Project at the South Side Community Coalition. Edgewood has partnered with other environmental justice congregations - including the Islamic Center, the UU's, and our sister UCC congregation in Haslett to bring solar panels to South Lansing community center that provides youth services, job training, senior programs, and more for South Lansing. So often solar panels are synonymous with wealthy homes that can afford them - this coalition is working to bring solar panels to an organization that supports primarily lower income folks. When they are installed next year, they will provide 100% of their energy needs and save them \$5,000 a year. Our gift represents our commitment to environmental justice and to working with our neighbors to make a difference in our local community. The story of this gift is the culmination of years of networking and relationship building our Green Team has been doing.

The other new donation I want to highlight is a gift to the All Faith Alliance for Refugees - AFAR. This is a group that was born out of our local Interfaith Clergy Association - it is our interfaith commitment to support refugee services and resettlement in the Lansing area. AFAR works closely with St. Vincent Refugee Services and the Refugee Development Center. Edgewood's gift will go to support the more than 300 Afghan families that will be arriving in the Lansing area this next year. Our area is a popular place for refugees because we are considered a welcoming community - this is in part because of the partnerships across organizations and the work of educating and advocating in local congregation that the All Faith Alliance for Refugees does. I have heard from many of you this fall asking how Edgewood can support Afghan refugees - there may be other opportunities in the coming months but I can say that part of your pledge dollars have aided in the initial effort to welcome Afghan families into our community.

There are 30 other stories just like these. Our Tithing Team committed this week to telling them throughout the year because they are important - they remind us that what we do as a church extends far beyond the walls of the building. As I sat in that meeting, as I heard some of these stories, I was moved to gratitude. I love that we don't wait until we see what we have left at the end of the year to give away. I love that we don't cut the portion for ourselves first and give the scraps away. Our 10% of gifts to other organizations is part of our financial plan each year. No matter what is going on, even on years when the budget seems lean and the needs seem great, we make our offering as a sign of our covenant with our neighbors.

Our story from Deuteronomy this morning echoes this call - it provides instructions to the Israelites about what they should do with the first fruits of their harvest. If you have ever tried to grow something in a garden you know that those first fruits - whether they are tomatoes or cucumbers or watermelon - are the most precious. You have been waiting for them all season

long. You have been tending and weeding and watering. You have been anxiously consulting weather reports and bug identification guides and seeking out the sage advice of master gardeners. When first fruits arrive they feel like a miracle. They taste sweeter and fresher than any fruit you have ever tasted in your life. That is how you know this offering the Israelites are told to make is serious - it is the first fruit. The best of what you have. The ones you have longed for the most. The Israelites are instructed to give it back to God.

The offering doesn't stop with the delivery to the altar though. They are further instructed to tell a story. Remember the past. Remember when they were foreigners in a foreign land. Remember the pain of their people. And remember how God was with them, how God brought them to a new home, a land flowing with milk and honey. Remembering and telling the story is as important as what they give - it helps them find meaning in the gift. It probably makes the fruit taste even sweeter knowing what purpose it serves. In offering it up to God they are reminded of how good God is, how good LIFE is. Even if it was a year with too much rain or not enough rain, look how far they have come. Look where God has brought them.

This ritual is a practice of gratitude. Give a gift in gratitude for what you have, and tell the story that inspired the gift. Giving and remembering go hand in hand. When we practice gratitude it is important to remember it is both a doing and a telling - an action and a story. Some of you all might have a gratitude journal at home. It's a common practice to write down at the end of each day or week one thing you are grateful for. I would like to add a second line to gratitude journals; First you write what you are thankful for - the moment in your day that pointed you toward love or filled you with purpose or brought a smile to your face - and then you should write, "What am I going to do about it?" How has that moment transformed you? What love or joy are you going to offer in turn? Where will the purpose you found in that moment of

gratitude send you next? You are thankful - and now what? What will it inspire you to give or do or offer?

When I said goodbye to my first church in Connecticut six years ago, I received a number of very generous thank you gifts in honor of my years of service. My favorite gift came from a seven year old whose family I had gotten to know quite well. He gave me a box with some of the rocks from his rock collection. There was an index card in the box scrawled with big kid writing that said "Rocks from Connecticut. Thank you." This kid LOVED his rock collection. Parting with some of them was a very big deal. They were his first fruits. But the note meant just as much - it reminded me of where I had come from. He told me that the rocks might be different in Michigan so these rocks would remind me of my time in Connecticut and connect me to my past. I might have inferred that last part from his note - but his words pointed me to the story. They reminded me of my journey. The note and the gift of the rocks brought me to gratitude and led me to joy.

Do you remember the last part of the instructions to the Israelites? The third and final step of their practice of gratitude? Celebrate. Together with everyone you live with, your family and friends and neighbors, celebrate all that God has given to you. Gratitude is the gateway to joy. Our practices of gratitude can certainly be thoughtful, but they should never be dour. To experience gratitude - to give offerings in thanksgiving and tell the story of why and how they came to be - is an act of celebration. This week as we set tables of gratitude with our families and friends, it will be a time of rejoicing and celebration. Inevitably some of us will tell the stories of how last year's table looked quite different, or maybe this year's table will as well. We will tell the story of loved ones who are missing and give thanks for their lives and the legacy of love they have left us. We will find our way to joy together. We will celebrate. Thanksgiving is a time

when we share and remember and hope that when we get up from our tables, we are changed somehow or we are inspired to go back into the world with a lens of gratitude.

Rejoice friends, as evidence from just one of the meetings I had this week, Edgewood has a lot of stories to tell. We have a lot to offer up - our first fruits are ripe for the picking and the giving. We are a people of gratitude. Individually, I hope that in this season and every season, you will also find your way to gratitude. Find the places that inspire comfort and love and affirmation. Find the people that you feel connected with and brighten your day. Remember where you have come from and where you are today. Remember that you are not alone on the journey. And when you remember, tell the story. Share it with each other, with loved ones, and even in church meetings. Share your gratitude. Make an offering of your first fruits so that your gift might become the source of someone else's gratitude. Experience joy. May we be a people of gratitude, of remembering, and of celebration, for the Bible tells us so.