

First Fruits

Rev. John Allen

My uncle Fred is an amazing cook. I start thinking about him a lot this time of year because growing up we always went to his house for Thanksgiving. He has always lived for that day, you almost wouldn't see him until the meal was ready to come out, back in the kitchen obsessing over the details of every dish.

And it is not just the traditional turkey and stuffing. Fred is Italian, so our thanksgivings have also always had a soup course, and a pasta course, before the main meal hits the table.

A couple weekends ago I officiated a family wedding, Fred's son, my cousin Michael and I got a chance to sit and chat with Uncle Fred for a while at the rehearsal dinner.

He is retired now, after a long career working for the Commonwealth's Department of Mental Health and he was telling me about the new think he has found keep him busy in retirement.

He has volunteered to be the head chef at the local Soup Kitchen, serving meals to his neighbors in need.

He was very excited to tell me all about it.

You see when Fred arrived he was not the head chef, just another volunteer. And he was very disappointed in what was coming out of the kitchen.

Like the beef stew, it was pretty good he said, but you can't *just* give someone beef stew. What about a salad, to brighten things up, and a nice buttery biscuit to soak up the broth. And of course something for dessert.

So at some point, after enough of his questions and pushing, they just put him in charge.

And he is putting every bit of himself into it, turning out the kind of dishes of the same quality that would grace his thanksgiving table. Cooking enough to send everyone home with a doggy bag or two of leftovers.

To hear him tell it, he is having the time of his life, offering the very best of himself and his talent to his neighbors who need a little help. “I wouldn’t serve it to them, if I wouldn’t serve it to my family” he said.

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The book of Deuteronomy, it is a book from the Old Testament largely filled with laws and descriptions of the rituals and practices that God ordains to order the lives of the Israelite people.

This passage describes a ritual for each year at harvest time, they are meant to take a basket of the first fruits of that harvest, some of the very first things to come off the trees and vines, and out of the

ground, and present them at the temple, where the priest will take them and place them on the altar.

And then scripture gives the person some lines, whoever brings this basket of first fruits to the temple is then supposed to recite the following:

“A wandering Aramean was my ancestor... when the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labour 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 and brought us into this 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.”

In doing this the person bringing the gifts is remembering their place within a larger story, that their ancestor Jacob escaped as a refugee to Egypt, starving and near-death, and overtime God raised up this

great people from that one man, freeing them and bringing them to this moment.

In essence the person bringing the offering is remembering in this recitation whose shoulders they stand on. Remembering the one who risked a journey across the dessert to seek a better life for them.

Remembering the family that raised them. And the earth that bore this bounty for them.

And it is the first fruits. The very first things that they gather in the harvest.

Imagine that, the plowing, irrigating, planting, weeding, all the hard work of tending to these crops so that your family will have something to eat in the year ahead. And the day finally arrives when the first fruits are at long last ready to be harvested, and those are loaded into basket, driven into the heart of the city, and given away.

And these offerings brought to the temple were not just burned, or thrown in a river, if you keep reading in Deuteronomy, you will learn that they are used to feed immigrants living in the land, orphans, and widows.

The first fruits, given away to serve neighbors who needed a little help.

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This ancient practice offers a profound challenge. It is a reminder that generosity is not meant to be something we consider only when we have a surplus. It is meant to be our first instinct.

That we are not meant to just give away out of what we have left, but are meant to share generously as our first response to what we have received.

And that little paragraph that everyone says when they walk into the temple, is the heart of the matter.

It is a reminder that no matter how hard we work, what we have ultimately depends on other people too, those around us and those who have come before us, and all of it depends on the baseline grace of God, the one who has given us life, and set before us the means to live in this world.

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Pending a few final inspections, our church is getting ready to open our brand new youth center downstairs.

I am so proud of this congregation for the act of extraordinary generosity that this project represents. We learned about a problem in our town, and people in this church started asking what we could do, and thanks to your generosity and hard work, we have been able to respond by offering the very best of what we could.

We made a gift to our wider community, not out of what we had leftover, but out of the best we had. Not out of what we could spare, but out of what we could imagine.

I hope that for our church, and that for each of us as individuals, this is just an inspiring beginning, and there is more to come. I hope that we can always ask each other, and ourselves, what is the very best we have to offer to all those with need within our reach.

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In Kansas City there is a Soup Kitchen run by the Episcopal Church that doesn't look like a soup kitchen at all. It looks like a restaurant. Guests arrive and are seated by hosts, given menus, a server takes their order, the meal comes on real plates with silverware, water glasses are refilled, the tables are cleared and bussed. If I had to guess, I would bet Uncle Fred's operation is only a few years away from looking like this.

The only difference is that no one gets a bill.

A few years ago a journalist wrote a piece about this new model and interviews one man who was dining there. His name is Brian.

“They’re treating me good here.” he said. “Almost like the don’t know that I am homeless.”

And that community that runs that soup kitchen, they are serving people leftovers, or trying to feed as many people as cheaply as possible.

They are sharing their first fruits. They are starting from a place of generosity. Not doing the best they can with what they have leftover, but asking from the very beginning what’s the very best they have to offer.

The kitchen is run by executive chef Michael Curry, the owner of a local restaurant.

Curry grew up in poverty. And as a child, he and his family frequently ate at soup kitchens.

He remembers what got him to his point in his life, and so his first response is to share what he now has with others.

So as you gather for your day of Thanksgiving in the week ahead. I invite you to take stock of what in your life you are grateful for. Whose shoulders bore you to this moment? What sustains you? Who do you depend on? What gifts has God poured out for you.

And as you pause to notice the fruits that fill your own life, I wonder what you might discover that you have to offer to others. Not out of what you have leftover, but out of those first fruits.