

Scripture: Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Matthew 9:35-38

Sermon Title: "First Fruits"

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Back on November 1<sup>st</sup>, something wonderfully exciting happened, and you may only know it if you are friends with my brother, the farmer, on Facebook. In a post that day, he shared a joy in his life saying simply, "corn harvest is complete!" This post includes several photos as well, depicting the harvest and a mound of corn in one of the wagons. And then, just this past Thursday, another post of celebration, with pictures of the harvest and a bounty of soybeans saying - "and the beans are off!"

To celebrate the harvest - how appropriate for this time of year. You know, I am so thankful to my brother who helps keep me aware of and rooted in the harvest and the rich tapestry of life and work that is witnessed each year at harvest times, because these moments of celebration and wagons filled with crops, these moments didn't just happen. They required much toil - tilling, planting, tending. They required a blessing from above - sun and rain. They required patience and even prayer as each season is unique and not every growing season will be bountiful. And then, we think beyond this one growing season into years past that blessed this year - the hard years when our father struggled to keep the farm and to keep it going and the ways that many hands and hearts helped us to do that, and beyond those years, the year when our grandmother and grandfather decided to purchase the farm in pursuit of our grandmother's dream to be a farmer. All of these moments, all of these memories, are part of the harvest my brother just celebrated.

In our scripture passage from Deuteronomy, the Israelites, receive some instructions on how to treat the harvest once they exit the wilderness and enter the Promised Land. They are told to take a portion of the first fruits, of their first crop grown, to use that portion as a thank you to God and, at the same time, to reflect on and remember the past. To remember their ancestors, to remember the challenges that they faced, to remember the growth and strength of their people, and to remember the Lord's help

and guidance in ages past. And then, they are called to celebrate this new harvest with their neighbors.

But what if the harvest, wasn't so bountiful? What if it was a particularly hard growing season, as they do come from time to time, how then are the Israelites call to thank God? If the harvest is sparse, is a celebration still expected? You know, when we first hear this passage from Deuteronomy, it can make it sound like the harvest which they are talking about is one of overflowing wagons, a huge bounty. After all, we are talking about the first fruits, first of many, in the land of milk and honey. We are talking about a ceremony of thanksgiving to God and a celebration with neighbors, surely the harvest must be extraordinary, right? In fact, as I think about my brother's Facebook posts, I realized that I assumed based on his enthusiasm that the harvest was a good one – he wouldn't celebrate it otherwise, would he? Nowhere in the passage from Deuteronomy, does God promise that the harvest will be great. Nowhere does God promise that the wagons will overflow or that the first fruits of the land will be the best fruits. And yet, God calls the people to thanksgiving and celebration. Even if the harvest is not extraordinary, thank you God. Even if the first fruits were sparse, thank you God. Even if the wagons are light and the harvest minimal, thank you God and let us celebrate, even with a Facebook post!

And yet, one might ask, what do we celebrate when the harvest feels light? We celebrate the bounty that is found in God. We celebrate the bounty that is found in community. We celebrate the bounty that is found in our past and lives led into freedom. For even when the crop for one year is not abundant, there is still a bountiful harvest to celebrate – a harvest rooted not just in soil, but in time, in history, and in God.

In the gospel of Matthew which we heard from today, as Jesus looked out on the crowds, on these people who were harassed and helpless, people who were sick and in need of healing, people who were lost in this world, he didn't see what many of us would see. He didn't focus on what was lacking. He didn't focus on what was sparse in

their lives. He saw the bounty, a harvest of plenty. For these lives, though many helpless, sick, and lost, were not limited in worth by the circumstances of that day or that year, but were worth so much when you remembered the love and grace of God.

While many of us may not be looking for a harvest from the fields, there is still a harvest in our lives that has been reaped and witnessed in a variety of ways – many unique to each of us. You may look at this past year in awe of the wonderful things that have blessed you, have been created in your life, have blossomed and filled your world with good things. You may look at this past year and feel an emptiness for it was a hard year fraught with challenges and concern. You may look back and find yourself somewhere in the middle. Yet, no matter what the harvest of this year has looked like for you, whether the first fruits were bountiful or sparse, we are called to celebrate – for remember, when Jesus sees you, even in the hardest and leanest of years, Jesus sees a bounty. For there is much potential yet to blossom. There are seeds that lay dormant within waiting to spring forth. There is soil within you that is being prepared for something perhaps yet unknown. In your very being, in your identity as a beloved and redeemed child of God, there is much to celebrate and for which to give thanks. As we approach Thanksgiving, may we look not just at this year, but at a lifetime, at a history, and at our God who was, is, and forever will be a source of eternal grace and never-ending love into our lives and into our world. And for these first fruits, we will forever have a reason to give thanks! Amen.