

(Deuteronomy 26:1-11 RSV)

<sup>1</sup> "When you come into the land which the LORD your God gives you for an inheritance, and have taken possession of it, and live in it, <sup>2</sup> you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from your land that the LORD your God gives you, and you shall put it in a basket, and you shall go to the place which the LORD your God will choose, to make his name to dwell there. <sup>3</sup> And you shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, 'I declare this day to the LORD your God that I have come into the land which the LORD swore to our fathers to give us.' <sup>4</sup> Then the priest shall take the basket from your hand, and set it down before the altar of the LORD your God. <sup>5</sup> "And you shall make response before the LORD your God, 'A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. <sup>6</sup> And the Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. <sup>7</sup> Then we cried to the LORD the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression; <sup>8</sup> and the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders; <sup>9</sup> and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. <sup>10</sup> And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which thou, O LORD, hast given me.' And you shall set it down before the LORD your God, and worship before the LORD your God; <sup>11</sup> and you shall rejoice in all the good which the LORD your God has given to you and to your house, you, and the Levite, and the sojourner who is among you.

## First Fruits, Grateful Remembrance

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Date: November 18, 2001

Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Growing up I was pretty concrete. I believed that what you saw was what you got. I believed things at face value. On the one hand, this made me very gullible. My father used to tell me that I was related to an old Native American Chief, Gungadin. I believed everything my father told me, so as late as thirteen years old I was repeating this claim in my ancestry. I told the admissions officer at my secondary school, “Yep, I’m related to Gungadin.” She never blinked, and neither did I. And she let me in, thinking God only knows what.

Being concrete made me gullible. But it also meant, oddly enough, that I didn’t fantasize much. I believed in Santa Claus without question – not as long as I believed in Gungadin, but well into grade school. But I recall in first grade, after Christmas vacation, the teacher asked, “Who heard Santa’s reindeer hooves on your roof?” I did not raise my hand, for I had heard nothing. And I was envious of the 90% of the class, whose hands were waving wildly, who had heard Santa’s reindeer. I believed in Santa Claus and his reindeer, but if I were going to hear them, they would actually have to be there.

It was with this positivist mind set that I used to sit perplexed in church. The minister would call the offering, and he would say, “And now it is time to give back to God a portion of what God has given us.” At first, I used to think to myself, “Wow, I missed that,” I thought to myself. “I thought the stuff came from my father and mother going to work. I had no idea God gave it to us.”

I started to do a little nonchalant research. “So, Dad, who pays for the food we eat, and the clothes we wear, and stuff like that?”

“Your mother and I do.”

“Uh, well, where do you get the money to pay for them?”

“We get it from going to work. We work all week, and the companies we work for pay us our wages, and then we buy the things we need.”

“Well,” I thought to myself, “That’s the same thing I see.” So, again, nonchalantly, I asked, “Well, what about God? Does any of it come from God?”

“Oh, Dudley, of course, it all comes from God.”

I was more perplexed than ever. “Well, then why do you go to work all the time. Why not stay home with me? Couldn’t God just drop the money off?”

“Well, that’s not exactly how it works, Dudley.”

I was unconvinced. It sounded a lot like God’s part was pretty theoretical, which didn’t work very well for a concrete kid. I remember about then hearing the joke about the minister who went visiting one of his parishioners. The parishioner was out working in the garden,

sweating over the rows of beautiful vegetables. The minister surveyed it all and announced to the parishioner, “Well, Bill, what a wonderful garden you and the LORD are growing.”

Bill looked up, “Me and LORD, Reverend?”

“Yes sir, Bill, that’s a fine garden you and the LORD are raising there.”

Bill kept on hoeing and didn’t even look up. He just murmured, “Well you should have seen it last year, when the LORD was on his own.”

I remember thinking, “Yeah, that’s right. I’m with Bill on this one.”

\*\*\* I think God was probably worried that the ancient Israelites would end up thinking about like I did. There is something that often happens when people are well off. They take being well off for granted. Most of us, even those of us who would not qualify as wealthy, are enormously well off. It is true that in the United States, in Cambridge, maybe even in this congregation, there are some who need a hand because they cannot afford what we consider basic necessities. And yet, there exists hardly anyone in the United States who isn’t enormously privileged by the standards of other nations. And, at least speaking for myself, we probably too often take it for granted.

And what happens when I take being well off for granted? Several things happen. Like the gardener the minister went to visit, I am apt to believe that whatever I have, I have earned all by myself. I am apt to believe that it is owed to me because I have worked hard. I am apt to imagine that I deserve my good fortune, and that as long as I keep up the good work, I will continue to be just fine, thank you.

Of course, my self-confidence is naive, but in my prosperity I don’t want to think so. But being well off, having the sun shine in your face and the wind at your back, is as elusive as it is seductive. When the harvest came in every year, God wanted the ancient Israelites to recite their history, their history which told of their humble beginnings where they were afflicted and treated harshly. In a sense this is the whole struggle between God and God’s people in the Hebrew Bible. God wanted the people to remember where they came from so that they wouldn’t take too much for granted. But the people kept wanting to forget. And forget they did. Time after time. And when they forgot, they became cock-sure, they became arrogant, they became self-assured and self-centered, and they became corrupt. At the front of the story of God and God’s people stands the deliverance of the Exodus. But the other bookend is the Exile in Babylon. The people were brought to Canaan, but there they took too much for granted, and they were swept back into servitude.

God wanted the people to remember from where they had come, for in remembering, they had some chance of acting in a way that would keep them from the pitfalls, the pitfalls that awaited them when they took what they had for granted.

Other things, related things, were also at stake. God understood that when the Israelites forgot from where they had come, when they forgot their humble beginnings, then it was easier for them to ignore the stranger, the sojourner, the widow and the poor. God meant for the Israelites to see themselves when they looked into the face of the stranger, for they too had been strangers in Egypt. But the people preferred to see not themselves in the face of the stranger, but someone utterly disconnected from themselves.

When I look into the eyes of a Muslim woman and see myself, I can far less easily see a person with an evil God. When I look at a homeless person and see in his eyes my eyes, I can less easily believe he deserves the plight in life he has gotten. When I see children suffering the grotesque signs of famine and see in their emaciated body the face of my sister, my heart has to break for what she is suffering.

The story God wanted the people to remember, the story of their deliverance God wanted them to recall and retell every year, that story was not just about them. Nor was it just about the wonderful things God had done. It was also a story about the wonderful things that God's people could do for one another. If the people did not take their prosperity for granted, if they remembered from where they came, and if they saw themselves in the faces of those who were experiencing what they had once experienced, then the people would follow God's lead, God's people would become a people, themselves joyously bringing about acts of deliverance in the name of the one who had delivered them. What a glorious picture that is!

\*\*\* Now, there is one more piece of unfinished business, one more piece of unfinished business in the story between the minister and his gardening parishioner. In the cynical stage of my early years, the gardener's response made all the sense in the world to me. The gardener made the garden, and that's all there was to it. Any of you who have raised a garden know there is a certain truth in the story. If the garden's not weeded and mulched and watered and cared for, it simply becomes a patch of overgrown weeds. There's no question about it. The gardener was right about that.

But when the gardener looks at it only that way, only as a project of his own making, the making of a garden becomes but a set of procedures, things to do to make it come out right. You prepare the ground. You plant the seeds at the right time. You weed and water and fertilize. And if you do it all correctly, the harvest will come in. And to be sure, there may be a certain amount of satisfaction in making a garden produce abundantly. If you are the perfectionist type, that contentment may be fleeting, for your thoughts turn quickly to thinking about how it could have been done even better, or changes for the better you will make for the next time. And, if the only satisfaction the gardener gets are his accomplishments, then it seems to me the greatest delight of all is likely to be missed.

In even the smallest of garden plots there are a million miracles. The soil has taken aeons of geological processes to become a rich environment in which to grow plants. Even now it is a teeming factory of microbes and compounds that can coax a tiny seed into a full-blown tomato plant, filled with fruit for harvest. Even the seed itself is a miracle. Moisture coaxes its hard shell to soften, and out of this unlikely case unfurls the first tender tendrils of a living organism. Each day the sun, the rain, even the wind contribute to its evolution from seed, to seedling, to robust plant to harvest.

So, why am I telling you all of this. I guess because, if I am paying attention only to the part of the gardening I'm doing, I'm taking too much credit; there's a lot more going on than what I'm doing. But more important even than that, if I'm paying attention only to the part I'm doing, then I am missing the world full of miracles that I am living in every day. My grandmother used to say that every moment of life was a miracle that we should not miss, that we should not take for granted.

This is a misleadingly simple insight. For its implications for me are vast. One might imagine that the happiest people in the world are the people who have been able to accomplish the most, the people who can look on their life's accomplishments with self-satisfaction, who can look on their accomplishments with pride, who can bask in the sweet aroma of their own success, who have the abundance of accumulated wealth. But you know better than that, don't you? We all know entirely miserable successful people, we all know enough of them to suspect that success and happiness are not very related.

But look at people you know who are grateful, who are grateful for the day, who are grateful for the million little miracles that are part of each day. Now, I am not talking Polly-anna, and I am not talking about something that only those who are well off and privileged can do. I have known people who have lived through enormous tragedy and whose lives have had more than their fair share of trouble, who have nonetheless been grateful for what they have seen as life's miracles. In fact, it seems that the gratefulness and the happiness that goes with it more often escapes those who have much. Perhaps having too much or having accomplished too much clouds one from seeing or even looking for the things in life to be grateful for – another problem with the luxury of taking things for granted.

God instructed the Israelites to be grateful. God instructed them to bring the first fruits of their gardens, their gardens which they had worked so hard in – God instructed them at that moment when they reveled in their abundance, to lift up a portion of it in thanksgiving and gratefully remember the miracle of their deliverance: “‘A wandering Aramean was my father ... And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which thou, O LORD, hast given me.’ And you shall set it down before the LORD your God, and worship before the LORD your God; and you shall rejoice in all the good which the LORD your God has given to you ...”

God knew that the very future of the people depended on whether or not they remained grateful. For if they did not, they would become arrogant and corrupt, they would oppress the stranger and the sojourner, and they would find misery even in their success. But if they remained grateful and rejoiced in all the Lord had given them, they would remain a humble people, they would see their face in the face of their neighbors and care for them rather than oppress them, and they would be attune to find delight in the manifold miracles of every moment of living. Remember, O Israel. Remember and be grateful, for on those things does your life depend. Amen.