

Deuteronomy 26:1-11
21 Feb. 10

Do you tell stories in your family? I mean stories about your family, past and present. Maybe someone in your family has done some genealogical research, and you have a family tree. If you do, maybe you know some stories about those ancestors. Stories about where they came from, what they did, what they were like, what talents or what quirks they had.

For most of us those stories don't go back too far. Most of us are forgotten in a few short generations. But about our immediate ancestors we probably tell stories. My wife, for example, never met my grandfather. Actually, I didn't either. My grandfather died in the great flu epidemic of 1918—while my grandmother was pregnant with my mother. Back then, there was nothing anywhere near a welfare state, and my grandmother was probably desperate. She married my grandfather's brother. It was he I knew as my Pop Pop. He was named Fred, and I am named after him. Char knows this story. Even though she never met him, she knows that he was a mechanic and that he mumbled. She even knows the standard response to Pop Pop, which was mMMm, a very noncommittal answer to a question or statement you couldn't understand. She knows this because we tell stories. Those stories help explain who we are and how we got here.

The reading from Deuteronomy is all about remembering your family history, where you came from and how you got to where you are today. This remembrance is set within the context of worship, so it's remembering together as a community that's in mind. But unlike most of our own family memories and stories, this one stretches far, far back into the past. "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and live there as an alien. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors. The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land glowing with milk and honey."

That's what the people are to say when they assemble for worship. Not, "When the Egyptians imposed hard labor on *them*, the LORD delivered *them*," but, "When the Egyptians imposed hard labor on *us*, the LORD delivered *us*." The people are to speak these words not as if it were a story about people long come and gone, but as if it were a story about themselves—because it is.

Which says something about Christian worship I don't want to let pass by. In the night in which he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to his disciples saying, "Take eat. This is my body, given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

This is our family story. It goes back countless generations. And while the stories of most of our ancestors have been forgotten, this story remains, because it tells us who we are, whose we are, and how we got to *be* who we are today.

The setting in Deuteronomy is one of worship. And the attitude is one of gratitude. The people are thankful that *they* have been rescued from slavery in Egypt. Even though this happened a generation or two before them, they give thanks for this deliverance. In Hebrew, the word

“give” is used seven times in these eleven verses. Six of those times it refers to God’s giving of the land. The one exception provides a sharp contrast. It refers to what the Egyptians gave them: hard labor. The attitude of gratitude stretches back past the present moment and remembers the contrast between what was and what came to be. It remembers that they got to where they are because God has been faithfully giving all along the way.

This attitude of gratitude is more than a feeling. The people give this attitude of gratitude a concrete expression with an offering of the first fruits of their new land. Their gratitude moves them to give off the top, not from the leftovers. It’s given so that they do not forget but remember their deliverance.

When we gather for worship, we do so to remember, to be re-made as members of the stories told here about God’s people. When we do as Jesus commands in remembrance of him, we become part that story, hearing Jesus speak to us today, “This is my body given *for you*; this is my blood shed *for you*.”

And even in Lent, even when we might be kneeling, this meal of remembrance is a meal of thanksgiving, of Eucharist, of gratitude. And then we are sent out to go in peace and serve the Lord. That is, we are called to give concrete expression to our thanksgiving, to our gratitude by living as followers of Jesus, by acting as little Christs for those around us, by coming back together again to remember and get re-remembered, by inviting other people to come and get re-remembered; and by offering the first fruits of our time and our treasure. And, if you want to take this passage more literally, maybe the first fruits of our gardens this summer, which would make fine gifts to the food pantry.

I want to challenge you this Lent to give your first fruits by doing the three things Jesus talks about in the Ash Wednesday Gospel: giving alms, growing toward a tithe; re-committing yourself to daily prayer; and intensifying your prayer through fasting. Lent is only six weeks long. For the next six weeks, tithe your income. Consider how much of that tithe you want to give to Living Water and choose how much of you want to give to our food pantry or the ELCA Hunger Appeal, to the homeless shelter or to relief efforts in Haiti, etc. choose just one or two. Commit yourself to daily prayer for your church and for the work of the people to whom you are giving your tithe. Observe a fast for one day each week, or maybe fast from certain foods or even bad behaviors for all of Lent.

These are the traditional practices of piety that draw us closer to God. Now, I’m not sure how much can happen in just six weeks, but for these six weeks of Lent, I challenge you to do what Jesus talks about in almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, and see what happens. See what joys and challenges you face. See what this does to your discipleship. See if your faith life is affected. See if these practices don’t reconnect you, re-member you to the stories that tell you who you are.