

Epworth Chapel on the Green
October 9, 2016
Harvest Festival
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Deuteronomy 8:6-18
Psalm 121
2 Corinthians 9:6-15
Luke 17:11-19

Today is our annual celebration of the Harvest Festival. In our increasingly urban society, one might wonder why a celebration of the harvest is in order.

All we need to do is return to the world of the Old Testament, a world which was very much an agrarian society. In this world, the harvest literally was a matter of life and death. A poor crop meant not a rise in commodity prices, but very likely starvation.

The religious and national life of the children of Israel in the Old Testament was built around the harvest. There are seven festivals prescribed in Leviticus, three of which are harvest related: First Fruits (after Passover); Feast of Weeks (i.e., Pentecost) in the Spring, and the Feast of Tabernacles in the Autumn.

First fruits marked the beginning of the barley harvest. The Feast of weeks marked the beginning of the wheat harvest. Tabernacles, or ingathering, marked the harvest of vines and olives.

In the Old Testament, these festivals were to be marked by both celebration and sharing. God's people were to use the tithes of their produce both to rejoice

and to give to the poor (Deut. 14:22-29). In fact, Deuteronomy 14:29 suggests that the Israelites' future harvests depended upon their ability to share with the poor and needy.

Our Scripture lessons today remind us of several important themes which are appropriate for our consideration on this day.

First, they remind us of one of the foundational truths of the Christian faith, namely, *that God is the Creator*. As such, everything we *have* and everything we *are* we owe to God. God is the source of everything in our lives. He is the author of the bare necessities, of our blessings, and everything in between.

One of our hymns (not sung today!) Says it well: "All that we have is Thine alone, a trust, O Lord, from Thee."

This is easy to remember in humble beginnings and lean years. But it is also easily forgotten in times of blessing and abundance.

Such is the message of Moses to the people in Deuteronomy. "You must never forget," he says, "that God is the source and giver of all good things in your life."

As we bring our offerings today and celebrate this day, we consciously remember that God is our Creator, and that he alone is the author and giver of every good gift in our lives. We are totally dependent upon his grace and mercy.

A second theme of this day brought to us from our lessons is this: ***God gives bountifully so that we can share generously.***

This is the message of Paul to the Corinthians, as he asks them to take a love offering for poor Christians in Jerusalem. This is amazing, since many in the church at Corinth were poor themselves. They might be tempted to think that they didn't have enough themselves, let alone the ability to share with others.

Paul challenges them to think in terms of abundance rather than scarcity, however. He tells them that generous giving results in God's bountiful blessing and enrichment. Paul was the first preacher to preach the famous sermon about how we can never out give God!

And Paul was right. God gives bountifully into our lives so that we may share generously with others. When we do this, there is blessing both for us and for others.

Finally, this day reminds us of our calling to ***cooperate with God in caring for the Creation.*** God has created us to live in peaceful and loving relationship with him and with our fellow human beings. The Creation provides for our needs, but we are charged with caring for the earth in responsible and loving ways.

Sadly, humankind often has not lived in love toward God and our neighbors, and this has led to the devastation of the Creation. We are now

beginning to see on a global scale the results of our failure to be good stewards of the earth God has given us.

This day reminds us that as Christians, we should pay attention to how our own lifestyles -- sometimes bent on relentless production and consumption -- affect the earth God has given us. We are reminded that the earth's resources will not last forever, and that God calls on each of us to be a part of the solution and not part of the problem.

All of these marvelous gifts that surround us remind us this morning of God's gracious giving into our lives. Let us rejoice and give thanks for his gracious love, and let us commit ourselves anew to sharing that love with others.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.