



## **Deuteronomy 26:1-15**

### **“Becoming Part Of The Story”**

October 20, 2013  
22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

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### **“Following Christ from City Center”**

## DEUTERONOMY 26:1-15 (RSV) "BECOMING PART OF THE STORY"

//14:22-29, Two Liturgical Confessions

### 1) vv.1-4 The First-Fruits Presented Before The Lord.

### 8 Scripted Actions

- 1 "When you come into the land which the LORD your God gives you for an inheritance, Egypt To Promised Land  
and you have taken possession of it and live in it,  
2 you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, 18:4 Act 1: You Shall Take And Go  
which you harvest from the 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 chose, to make his name dwell there.  
3 And you shall go to the priest who is in the office at that time, and say to him, 21:5 Act 2: You Shall Go & Say  
"I declare this day to the LORD your God God's Promises Fulfilled In Me!  
that I have come into the land which the LORD swore to our fathers to give us." Act 3: You Shall Offer  
4 Then the priest shall take the basket from your hand, and set it down before the altar of the LORD your God. 18:4  
Local Sanctuary

### 2) vv.5-10a Recitation Of The Holy History (The Creed, Gen. 12ff.) And Prayer.

#### a) Creed Of God's People: Identify With The Jews Story Of Salvation: Exodus.

- 5 "And you shall make a response before the LORD your God, Act 4: You Shall Confess The O.T. Creed  
'A wandering Aramean was my father; Jacob? 6:21ff.  
and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; Ex. 1  
and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous.  
6 And the Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. Bricks Without Straw  
7 Then we cried to the LORD the God of our fathers, Note All The Plurals: Us/Our  
and the LORD heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression;  
8 and the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, Ex. 4:34  
with great terror, with signs and wonders; Plagues vs. Pharaoh's Magicians  
9 and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. 6:3

#### b) Prayer Of Consecration:

#### Act 5: You Shall Pray: God Gives First

- 10 And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which thou, O LORD, hast given me.'

### 1') vv.10b-11 The Tithe Presented Before The Lord ( Liturgy Of Triennial Tithe, 14:22-29).

- And you shall set it down before the LORD your God, v.4? Act 6: You Shall Tithe As Worship  
and worship before the LORD your God; Personal Devotion  
11 and you shall rejoice in all the good which the LORD your God has given Sacred Meal Implied In "rejoice"  
to you and to your house, you, and the Levite (i.e. landless priests), Community Celebration  
and the sojourner (i.e. foreigner) who is among you.

### 2') vv.12-15 The Recitation Of Personal Obedience And Prayer.

14:22 On Annual Tithe

#### a) Creed Of Individual's Integrity:

Each Person In Community Was Accountable

- 12 "When you have finished paying all the tithe of your produce in the third year, which is the year of tithing, Shared Abundance  
giving it to the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, Every Third Year, Special Tithe  
that they may eat within your towns and be filled,  
13 then you shall say before the Lord your God, Act 7: You Shall Say  
"I have removed the sacred portion out of my house, Tithe Removed  
and moreover I have given it to the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless and the widow, Given  
according to all thy commandment which thou has commanded me; My Duty  
I have not transgressed any of thy commandments, neither have I forgotten them; Obedience To Law  
14 I have not eaten of the tithe when I was mourning, Confession Of Innocence  
or removed any of it when I was unclean, Fitness To Participate In The Ritual  
or offered any of it to the dead; No Ancestor Worship, Occult Involvement  
I have obeyed the voice of the LORD my God,  
I have done according to all that thou hast commanded me.

#### b) Prayer Of Petition:

#### Act 8: You Shall Pray

- 15 Look down from thy holy habitation, from heaven,  
and bless thy people Israel and the ground which thou hast given us,  
as thou didst swear to our fathers, a land flowing with milk and honey." 6:3, Life Flourishes For All

## BECOMING PART OF THE STORY

*“And behold, now I bring the first of the fruits of the ground,  
which thou, O LORD, hast given me.”*

Off the top giving out of gratitude.

DEUTERONOMY 26:10

**A**t first they sat on the back row, arriving a few minutes after eleven and scooting out during the benediction. From his pulpit view the pastor wondered who they were, but since they didn’t sign the register, he decided to let them have their anonymity for a while. Early to mid-thirties, a child clearly on the way, a good candidate for a young mother’s group he thought to himself during the opening hymn as they slipped in for the fourth consecutive Sunday and found their place with the help of the ever-alert Main Street ushers headed by Bill Tunstall.<sup>1</sup>

One of the older members and life long residents of Greenwood, a well-connected woman by the name of Mrs. Abney-Self-Park-Hodges, recognized the husband. He’d had gone to school with her son years before at the Citadel, so she invited them out for lunch after the service that fourth Sunday. It was a point of connection, and that is where the relationship began, not with the pastor, but with a caring laywoman who knew how hard it had been for her daughter and son-in-law to find a good church when they first moved from Greenwood to far away Columbia.

It was a week later that the pastor received a phone from Mrs. Hodges informing him about Sandra (the young woman’s name). Her mother was in Self Regional, and he would go by for a visit. He did, and on a day Sandra happened to

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<sup>1</sup> This bit of pastoral fiction is a composite of several situations from across the years shaped into an almost-believable story. For exegetical insights, see A.D.H. Mayes, *Deuteronomy: The New Century Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 331-337.

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be there. It was there he began to piece together something of their story.

Both she and Brad had been married before and were desperate for this one to work. They had Jennifer (his six-year-old daughter) two weekends a month and wondered if she would fit into a Sunday School class. The move to Greenwood had not been easy, what with Brad being on the road so much with Proctor & Gamble's new plant and her mother being ill. The pastor just listened, cutting his eyes from time to time to Sandra's mother who nodded as Sandra spoke nervously about the pregnancy and all the changes since moving a year ago.

"Is this your first child?" the pastor asked tentatively. He noticed the silence as tears filled the corners of Sandra's eyes. "No, we lost a child a year ago three months into the pregnancy."

In his mind the pastor began totaling up the stress points on his mental calculator: pregnancy, miscarriage, move, traveling husband, new church, step-daughter, and now a sick mother. This woman needs some support and a few Christian girlfriends he thought to himself. When a nurse came to wheel Sandra's mother off for an X-ray, the pastor used this as an occasion to end the visit with a prayer. He reached out his hands and, with the nurse included, made a circle round the bed. He turned the raw material from the visit into a request that God bring healing to Sandra's mother and that Sandra and Brad grow in their love for one another and for the child that was on the way. That afternoon he mailed them a copy of the service for The Blessing Of A Pregnancy. They liked the idea and scheduled a Sunday for family and friends to be present right after the Sunday Service. A web of Christian love was being woven around a new family. Not all at once, but slowly.

Religiously speaking, Sandra was Baptist and Brad Roman Catholic, so they thought Methodist might be a good compromise. After all, they'd heard that the new pastor at Main Street looked like a priest but preached like a Baptist! Like many, they had grown up in the church but then drifted in their young adult years, attending only when home to visit parents. Sandra still read her Bible occasionally, the one her church gave her when she was baptized at a revival at age thirteen.

The divorces made them feel even more distant from their Christian roots. It was hard to admit failure and your part in it. Not all dreams come true. Brad could no longer receive communion in his church, and Sandra felt like everyone looked down on her at the church she grew up in. Her mother assured her it wasn't true, but

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Sandy wasn't convinced. But it was the loss of the first child and the one on the way that sent them back looking for something they couldn't define: A place to belong? A place to help them be a family? A place to make Sundays more than sleeping in and brunch out? A place to find out if God still had anything to do with life? A blessing for their child? Or maybe all of it together?

The part of the service at Main Street that Brad most identified with was communion. The cup and loaf on the table reminded him of what it looked like at St. Joseph's where he grew up. He was surprised to find that the sung responses were the same ones he'd memorized so long ago. Having the pastor stand behind the table and say the words "Lift up your hearts" made him feel at home. It was enough alike to feel safe, but different enough to be interesting. Over the weeks he'd figured out that the Methodist spin on basic Christianity was to have a faith that changed your life from the inside out, not just going through the rituals, and that made sense to him.

Sandra liked the children's sermons; they reminded her of happy memories from childhood when she sat between her parents in *big church* and was allowed to draw quietly. One of those drawings on an old offering envelope was still in her Bible marking the passage the minister read at her and Brad's wedding, I Corinthians 13. She once memorized it in Vacation Bible School. It sustained her after the miscarriage, even though she was angry at God for the longest time. Brad never knew how often she quoted it to herself after one of their fights about money. It was the umbilical cord of her connection with God.

There was one part of the service, however, that made Brad uncomfortable. It was the offering. In a cynical moment, Brad had said to her, "The church is just another business. All they want is your money," but even he didn't believe it. The pastor never mentioned money in the two visits he'd made to their home. It's just that money was tight with the child support and the car payment and the mortgage and all. To be reminded every Sunday when the brass plates floated by that generous giving was a part of faith gave him a twinge of conscience that wouldn't go away. Neither Brad nor Sandra had any idea of what it takes to fund a church like Main Street. Their parents had done the giving; it was not something they'd ever thought about. They'd been away from church for fifteen years. Church was something their parents and older, responsible people had run. There was just so much to learn.

Sandra explained to Brad one Sunday on the way home that the word *tithe* was not just a synonym for the word *giving*; it meant giving ten percent to God through

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the church. He couldn't believe it, "Do you mean that God wants ten percent off the top? We could never do that!"

"Not right away," she replied, "we have too much credit card and student loan debt, but my mom and dad tithed the whole time I was growing up, and I did until I went off to college and got involved in other things like sorority dues."

"You tithed!" said Brad. "You never told me that before. I thought I knew everything about you!"

"You didn't ask. Let me finish. We never lacked anything. Each week we would make out our offering envelopes on Sunday morning and place them in the front of our Bibles. They would let me put them in the plate. It made me feel important. I can mark every raise my father ever received because the numbers on the outside of the envelope would change the next week."

"I remember one Sunday," said Sandra, "it was nearing Christmas and I wanted a new bike. I asked my Dad why he gave so much to the church. If he would just skip one week, I could get the bike. He slipped me a piece of peppermint candy, and whispered, 'Sandy, you can't out-give God. He's got a bigger shovel than we do. And anyway, the Bible says that the tithe is *holy to the Lord*.' I didn't know what the word *holy* meant, but I knew it was important. I will never forget those words. My dad was a faithful man, Brad. You know that. You even said so when you spoke at his funeral the year before we married."

"He was a good guy, Sandy, and I miss him, especially the talks we had when you and your mother were busy in the kitchen. He never beat me over the head with his religion, but I know he prayed for me every day. We even drank a beer together now and then at the golf course when your mother wasn't looking. I wonder if our coming to Main Street has anything to do with his prayers? You know us Catholics believe in the prayers of the saints!"

They both laughed.

The next week Brad watched as Sandy took an envelope out of her Bible and dropped it in the plate. When he saw the amount he was shocked. It was a full five percent! That new cell phone would have to wait and the new Taylor-Made driver put on hold. This was getting personal! Her elbow was sharp as she poked him in the ribs and then reached down with the other hand to scratch an itch on her expanding abdomen.

Brad thought to himself, "How can she give when we haven't even started a college fund for the baby yet? He whispered in her direction, "Our broker's not going to be happy about all this new generosity."

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She leaned over and whispered back, “No, but God and I are already very happy, so make a choice, big boy.”

That’s what he loved about his Sandy. Deep convictions and the spunk to make them stick. Being married to a Baptist girl had changed several of his values. On that Brad and I have total agreement!

It was a communion Sunday, and even though no one else did, Brad crossed himself as he took the bread and cup. It was a physical way of putting himself at the feet of Jesus in this special moment. Kneeling beside his wife, he prayed for the baby and that he would be a better dad than his father who was an alcoholic. Life was so good he felt as if his heart was going to burst. It was hard looking into the faces of the people as he walked back to his seat and read the announcements in the bulletin. “This is a busy place,” the thought to himself. Scouts, mission trips, study groups, choirs, food panty, prayer meetings.

Brad couldn’t believe the way the ladies at the church responded when the baby came. They had a shower and brought in a meal. The pastor came by the hospital the next afternoon. He read Psalms 127 and 128 at the bedside and told them that these twin psalms were celebrations of Hebrew family life sung on the way up to Jerusalem for one of the required yearly festivals. The Jews, apparently, were big on marriage and family and passing on the faith in songs. Brad laughed at the phrase, “Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house...” It struck him as funny.

He’d never thought of Sandy as a vineyard before. And when Pastor Phil came to phrase, “Lo, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord,” he looked Brad dead in the eye and smiled before glancing back at this Bible to finish the psalm. Then he took their child in his arms and prayed a prayer of thanksgiving for the birth. Brad felt the same flood of feelings he’d at communion two months before. It was a mixture of awe and gratitude, responsibility and fear all rolled into one. Before leaving the pastor gave them a brochure on baptism and said that he would like to come by in a month or so after things got settled with the new baby.

Neither Brad nor Sandra had ever joined a church before on their own. In one home visit they planned for Nathan’s baptism and in the next talked about church membership. They had one of those mobile baby monitors that looks like a walkie-talkie, and twice each time Sandra hopped up to check on *the precious one* that had so disrupted their lives.

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## **Deuteronomy 26:1-15 ..... 8**

While she was out, the pastor said to Brad, “That will stop if you have a second child. My dad the country doctor says that second children prosper on judicious neglect. First kids are always spoiled. Have the two of you gone out on a date yet? I think it’s about time!” Brad nodded and made a mental note to arrange for a babysitter and a night out.

When they got to the part of the membership interview about giving and making a pledge for the year Brad had lots of questions, “How much money did it take? Where did it go? Did everybody tithe? Was it OK to base the tithe on after-tax income?” The pastor answered what questions he could and referred Brad to the head of the Finance Committee for details about where the money went.

Brad loved spread sheets and columns of numbers, and after he’d inspected the budget and the latest financial report he was not at all concerned with plans and priorities, only that the giving didn’t meet it. He wondered why people weren’t keeping the promises they’d made. Some might have had setbacks, but not this many. Why were so many deadbeats coasting on the generosity of others? For a moment or two he felt superior, but then it hit him; the check Sandy put in the plate that Sunday was the first time he’d ever given anything to the church in his whole life. Perhaps he should be as patient with others as God had been with him.

The Pastor could tell Brad had lots of energy around the issues of money and giving. “Brad, I have a challenge for you. Here’s a Scripture sheet from a stewardship sermon I preached from Deuteronomy 26. I want you and Sandy to read it every day for a week and see what you learn on your own. Keep a list of questions on the back, and I’ll try to answer them next time we get together.” Brad and Sandy accepted the assignment. Brad especially like the fact the pastor didn’t so much tell him what he ought to do as invite him to discover for himself from Scripture.

Brad had never read the Bible on his own before, but this little section of fifteen verses was manageable. He knew about the Exodus from Egypt. He’d seen it in an old film starring Charlton Heston as Moses. He especially remembered the part about the ten plagues, the crossing of the Red Sea, and the lightning atop Mt. Sinai. Brad didn’t read much; he wished the whole Bible was on video. Sandy was also able to answer some of his questions.

Between the two of them they figured out that this passage was from an agricultural setting in the Promised Land and that the first-fruits of the harvest

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## Deuteronomy 26:1-15 ..... 9

uniquely belonged to God. Moses was speaking to the children of Israel just before they entered the Promised Land. Since God gave them the land, everything they had- even the stuff they worked for- was a gift. They also saw that for the Hebrews giving was not an option. It was part of what it meant to be part of God's people, a sacred duty with giving as a regular reminder of where it all came from.

It was not hit and miss, but a regular part of life with certain words and actions written down in a formal service that occurred with a priest or Levite in a sanctuary where God made his name to dwell. They figured that must be the Old Testament church. Sermon by Moses, creed and then prayer and giving, a liturgy of sorts, an ordered way to cover the bases and make sure nothing important was left out.

Sandra took a red pen and circled seven action verbs in the first four verses, "And you shall *take*... and you shall *put* it in a basket... and you shall *go*... and you shall *say*... and the priest shall *take* the basket from you hand, and *set it down* before the altar of the LORD your God... and you shall *say*...." It was all written out in clear order: do this, do this, say this, do this.... They figured that was the bulletin!

So that's why they passed the big, shiny brass plates each week, thought Brad. People were no longer farmers giving olives and grain and dates and pomegranates. We live in a cash, not a barter economy. Now we give money, but the principle was the same. We are not owners but stewards. Out of the combination of God's gift and our work, wealth is created, and from this an offering is made off the top. Brad was beginning to see his ability to work was itself a gift he did not create. For all his work, he was not a self-made man. No one was.

It was when Brad remembered the feelings he had at the communion table and when the pastor prayed over Nathan that giving began to make sense. He needed to *do something* with his gratitude, with this intense feeling of being blessed by God. Giving was one way to do that. It wasn't paying dues. Not giving to get, and it wasn't buying off God. It wasn't doing it because everyone else did. It was gratitude pure and simple. Any other motive was substandard.

The next section in verses 5 through 9 stumped them. Not only did the Hebrew farmer have to *do* certain things in a certain order, he also had to *say* certain things when he made his gift of produce. And since most of them were illiterate, he probably had to memorize the old creed, "A wandering Aramean was my father, and he went down into Egypt...."

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## Deuteronomy 26:1-15 ..... 10

It sounded almost like a formal creed, a brief history of what God had done to give birth to the Jews. God took a bunch of bedouins, sent them to Egypt, then rescued them to be his own people. Brad knew about creeds from his Catholic training; he had to memorize the Nicene Creed for his first communion years before at St. Joe's. But what did all that mean? He wrote a question on the back of the sheet, "Ask about the Arameans."

When Brad and Sandra got to verse 10 they found a connection with the upcoming baptism. In a certain sense Nathan was the first-fruits of their marriage, and in the baptism they would be offering him back to God, just as Brad had earlier with Jennifer. God gives the power to create wealth, and God gives the power to conceive children. Our very bodies and their powers are gifts from a loving Creator.

This was new stuff to Brad. Sometimes it made him almost dizzy as he realized he was not a self-made man at all. Was he a good worker? Yes, but not self-made. It was all a gift, one he'd taken credit for far too long. Sandy remembered a lot of old stuff from Sunday School. God wants us to enjoy the good he has made; they particularly liked verse 11, "...and you shall rejoice in all the good which the LORD your God has given." He also wants us to give.

As part of their daily reading of the assigned passage, Brad and Sandra began to make a list of reasons for giving. By the time the pastor came back for his follow up visit, they had found seven from Deuteronomy 26:

1. We give because God commands it for our good so that we remember where it all comes from. Giving is a cure for arrogance and prideful self-sufficiency. It's a good thing to sing each week, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow...." It's a great antidote to the great lie that life's all about *me and mine*.
  2. We give because of the wonderful gift of our child. The first-fruits of the field and the first-fruits of the womb. God comes first.
  3. We give because it's needed to support the church and its leaders, the Levite and the priest, who teach the faith and depend on us for their livelihood. We want them to share in the good things of life as well. Their job is important to the welfare of everyone else. If they were to vanish, who would tell the story and combat the sin of amnesia?
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**Deuteronomy 26:1-15 ..... 11**

Without them as living reminders, who would keep us faithful?

4. We give because vulnerable people, the widow and the orphan, need care and ought to be included in God's party. The poor also belong to God.
5. We give to evangelize the Gentiles, the sojourner and foreigner who is among us, so that they know that God and God's people are full of hospitality and mercy. We give so the message can be spread to outsiders, nearby and around the world. Giving fuels missions.
6. We give because it gives confidence before God. It is a good thing to be able to confess with a clear conscience and in front of others the words that end verse 14, "I have obeyed the voice of the Lord my God, I have done according to all that thou hast commanded me." Integrity matters. Obedience matters. Accountability matters.
7. And finally, we give because it makes us a part of something larger than ourselves, part of what God is doing in the earth, building a people who will live before the world by the resources of heaven. It was because this single Jewish farmer knew he was part of a chosen people that he could pray verse 15 from memory:

"Look down from thy holy habitation, from heaven,  
and bless *thy people Israel*  
and the ground which thou hast given *us*,  
as thou didst swear to *our fathers*,  
a land flowing with milk and honey."

In a world of *I* and *me* and *mine*, it was good to say *we* and *us* and *our* from time to time. It meant you were part of a larger community with a common vision. It meant you had become part of the story of God and his people.

There was very little to discuss when Pastor Phil came back by a week later. God himself had taught them. Oh! and about the Arameans. It was what the Hebrews were before they became Jewish; they were a wandering desert tribe! It was the creed of Israel, their story of rescue from Egypt.

Giving is never just a donation. It's part of a story of God's work in the world,

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## Deuteronomy 26:1-15 ..... 12

first in Israel, then in Jesus and his church, and finally through each one of us. The Apostles' and Nicene Creeds serve the same function for the church. They are our story in miniature. Giving money and giving verbal testimony always go together.

On the Sunday they joined Main Street a lot of things came together. They offered Nathan to Jesus Christ in baptism. There were two other baptisms that Sunday. When they asked why they couldn't be the only ones, the pastor instructed them that baptism was not *prince or princess for a day*, that the emphasis was not on them as an isolated family but on Christ and his family the church. It was about *us* and *we*, not *me* and *mine*. That made sense. They recited the story in creedal form during the baptism service. They turned in a pledge card and received a box of envelopes. It was Deuteronomy 26 all over again. Amazing, they thought, to be a part of something so old and yet so relevant today. Is this what faith is all about?

That Sunday Sandra and Brad had a deep sense they'd come home. It was not a tithe yet, but that Sunday they made a commitment to simplify spending, pay off debt, and to move up at least two percent a year till they were tithing and could say with integrity what the ancient Hebrew said in verse 13, "I have removed the sacred portion out of my house, and moreover I have given it to the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless and the widow." Taking the Dave Ramsay Course *Financial Peace* was already on their calendar.

Tithing is no longer an impossible goal but a sign of faith they wouldn't trade for anything. God provides through their work and beyond it; they live simply and well; they give. They belong. It feels right and good. Maybe this is what it means to be blessed and to be at home with God's people. To be part of something much bigger than yourself, to be connected to God through his people and their work.

It's been a year now since they snuck in and sat on the back pew Sandra's mother died a few month's back. Again the church rallied around them and sustained them. They've found a Sunday School class and a bonus of baby sitters. Rumor is they're working on a second child. Pastor Phil told Brad to take lots of vitamins!

Faith in Jesus Christ and faithfulness to a local church has changed their lives forever. And since they couldn't be here this Sunday, they said I could tell their story. They like what they've found at Main Street. I wonder who they'll tell?

Who will you tell? It's the way the story spreads.

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