

Thou Shalt Throw a Party

Deuteronomy 14:22-29

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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I want to begin by thanking Kerby for preaching last Sunday, and for directing us toward the Christian hope that both inhabits our present moment and beckons us onward into God's promised future.

Whenever I am away for a Sunday and then go back and listen to the sermon, I am struck by how many gifted thinkers and preachers we have in our orbit here at Lethbridge Mennonite Church. This is a gift that I don't take lightly, and I hope you don't either.

So, after a one-week hiatus, we're back to our 2020 Faith Questions sermon series which will take us through the next three Sundays.

This year, if you'll recall, I broadened the call for questions to include not only questions about this or that faith issue, but also specific passages in the Bible—maybe passages that you feel are neglected in the three year cycle of lectionary readings, or passages that you're simply curious about or troubled by.

So, the next three sermons are going to be more in this latter category. Today, we're looking at the passage from Deuteronomy that Murray read earlier in the service. Next week, we're looking at the story of Job (an impossible task for one sermon, if ever there was one!), and we'll wrap it up on February 23 with a look at the story of Rahab from the book of Joshua.

A quick aside: I was interested to note that all of the bible questions this year came from the OT. How very un-Mennonite of you!

But this does reflect a basic reality for many people. We tend to find the OT harder to make sense of than the NT.

Just this week, my daughter Claire was texting me with all kinds of questions about the OT and why God seems so different from the God we see in the gospels, for example.

This is a massive issue involving, at its very core, questions about how we understand the nature of the Bible.

Questions like:

- What kind of book is this?
- Is it even proper to speak of it as a “book” as opposed to, say, a “library?”
- How is it best interpreted?
- Which parts reflect the context of the time and place and do not apply to us and which parts are timeless?

These are some of the questions we’ve been looking at in one of our adult Sunday School classes as we read Meghan Larissa Good’s excellent book *The Bible Unwrapped* (you are welcome to join us!).

At any rate, back to the question/passage of the day. When I opened up the little slip of paper in the question box back in December it simply said, “Deuteronomy 14:22-29.”

After reading the passage, I was puzzled. It wasn’t a particularly controversial text nor was there any obvious interpretive issue that leapt off the page at first glance.

What was the person who submitted the question wondering about this passage?

Were they unsure about *how* to tithe ten percent? I was pretty sure I could help them with that, but it certainly wouldn’t take a whole sermon! 😊

I later found out that the question was submitted by Jonathan Wiebe. For those who don’t know, Jonathan is a young adult from our church who is currently studying at Columbia Bible College in Abbotsford, BC.

This was even more of a head scratcher, at least initially. A question about tithing from a member of a generation that is notorious for *not* tithing (at least, if the experts are to be believed).

It may surprise you to learn that when I was in my early twenties, I was *not* spending a great deal of time pondering the modern-day implications of the ancient Hebrew law in Deuteronomy. And I was *certainly* not thinking too carefully about tithing.

So, Jonathan is to be commended for being a more virtuous twenty-something than I was. 😊

I decided to do a radical thing and ask Jonathan what drew him to submit this passage.

Here's what he said:

I think the Deuteronomy passage is challenging when we compare it to our modern views on tithing. Often, we see tithing as giving away 10 percent of our income, and from what I have been able to discern, it often ends there.

In this passage the ten percent is used for what seems to be a big, all-inclusive party, including offerings of both food and money. It almost seems like a huge church potluck, that's funded by 10 percent of the entire church's income, both monetary, and non-monetary. I can't help but wonder what an example like this means our modern tithing tradition.

I guess in summary, I feel it's a perspective on the giving of ten percent that I have heard very little about and am curious to know how it applies.

There is also a good opportunity for an alcohol joke in verse 26 (if that's something you're into).

Hope this helps!

Jonathan

It *did* help. And I have to say, it's very rewarding to hear one of our young adults engaging with Scripture on this level!

What *does* this passage have to us today? Is it an indictment of our giving habits? Has our giving become kind of a joyless, mechanical affair?

Do we just grudgingly write a cheque once a month and consider our duty done?

Is our giving mostly an individual or private affair in contrast to what, in Deuteronomy, sounds more like a party or a “huge church potluck” as Jonathan put it?

What is the word of the Lord to us through this ancient law given to the Israelites on the threshold of Canaan?

The first thing to say is that this was a law given to the people of Israel, not to us.

This isn't a sneaky way of avoiding what it teaches. I do think there is much we can learn from this passage and we'll get to that.

But we do need to remember that this passage comes in the broader context of an ancient legal code for a group of people in a very different time and place than us.

Deuteronomy is basically a summary of the law before the people enter the land promised to them. Think of it as a really long and repetitive sermon. 😊

These commands about tithing were not originally given to twenty-first century inhabitants of a technologically advanced society in an increasingly globalized world with well-developed social safety nets and more or less mature institutional structures.

They were given to what was at the time a wandering group of nomads who were about to enter a more settled existence and needed structure and firm parameters to govern their collective life and worship.

We don't do everything the book of Deuteronomy commands (nor should we). The passage immediately before today's reading began ends with the command, “Do not boil a kid in its mothers' milk” (Deut. 14:21).

(It's talking about goats not humans, in case you're wondering, but still, perhaps not the most relevant command for our purposes.)

The rest of chapter fourteen also includes prohibitions against eating pork (sorry bacon lovers), rabbits, rock badgers, and ostriches, among others. You are allowed to eat a roebuck (although I've never seen that one on the menu at any restaurants around town).

All of these dietary restrictions were meant to guard Israel's distinctness and ritual purity (some speculate that there were built-in health precautions as well). But we obviously do not follow all of these laws today.

The point of all this is not to mock these laws and practices but simply to point out two very obvious and important things:

1. We are not ancient Israelites. Their context was *very* different from ours.
2. We cannot simply take Scriptures from this time and place and plop them into our context and declare that we are reading faithfully.

Having said all of this, we are also not free to make the opposite error of just writing off the OT law as irrelevant for our time and place.

We're not allowed to say, "That was just a bunch of primitive laws for primitive people! Why would we ever imagine that it has anything to say to us?!"

We *do* believe that God speaks through all of Scripture, even if not in the same way.

Few people would say that "Do not boil a kid in its mother's milk" is as important a verse as "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Some parts of Scripture speak with more urgency and timelessness than others.

But some themes echo throughout the entire narrative. And the theme of generosity and care for the marginalized that we see in Deuteronomy is one of these.

It is a passage commanding generosity and community-mindedness. It is a passage that instructs the people of Israel to regularly set aside a portion of their produce to do two things:

1. To provide for those who could not provide for themselves
 - a. Levites (religious duties)
 - b. Orphans
 - c. Widows
 - d. Foreigners
2. To celebrate together in the context of worship/remembrance
 - a. It is widely believed that this passage refers to bringing the tithes together at the three annual festivals of pilgrimage
 - i. Shavuot (wheat harvest/the giving of the law on Mt. Sinai)

- ii. Sukkot (agricultural festival/time when the people of Israel lived in booths in the wilderness)
- iii. Passover (deliverance from Egypt)

This is why the people of Israel were commanded to live lives of disciplined, structured generosity.

To provide for the needs of those on the margins. To do so in the context of worship, celebrating God's goodness and faithfulness, and remembering what God had done for them.

These two aspects of giving transcend time and place. And these ought to shape our attitudes and practices around giving as well.

So, to get back to what motivated Jonathan to ask about this passage. How are we doing? How do we think about our own giving? How do our practices compare to those given to the people of Israel?

My first instinct—and maybe this is just typical Mennonite guilt—is to assume that we're not measuring up, that we should be doing more, better, etc.

But this instinct was challenged throughout the week. It was quite a week.

On Tuesday morning, I received a call from a young woman who had been kicked out of her home with her ten-year-old daughter. She had \$30 in her wallet and nowhere to go.

After speaking with her, asking questions, learning her story, I eventually met her at Wal-Mart, arranged for her to get some groceries and connected her with the YWCA Harbour House who said they might be able to find her lodging.

The next day, Kathy, one of our deacons, met with a woman we have helped in the recent past who was fleeing an abusive relationship in BC. She was trying to start again in Lethbridge, but her husband tracked her down and physically assaulted her this week. It was a heartbreaking story.

Her brother agreed to come get her from Manitoba and Kathy arranged to help them with gas money to escape this situation.

Throughout the week I received six phone calls, Facebook messages, texts from people who had heard about me and our church and were looking for help in getting a family member from a war-torn country into Canada, or from other churches looking for advice.

Our church seems to have developed a reputation as being able to help refugees. I am proud of this, even if I sometimes grow weary of people thinking that I have a magic document that I can sign that will instantly bring their loved ones to Canada.

So, it had been a week full of need.

And then, on Thursday evening, we had our AGM where we discussed, among other things, our budget.

Now, perhaps you don't think of a church budget as the most natural source of inspiration. You wouldn't be alone in this.

But as I looked at the lines on the spreadsheet, I saw lines for:

- The deacon's emergency fund, from which we draw upon throughout the year to help vulnerable people in our community
- The soup kitchen, which provides hot meals every day to the hungry and the homeless.
- The hospital chaplain, which offers prayer and support to the sick and the dying.
- Streets Alive, which works with the addicted, the poor, the mentally ill, and others.

And beyond our budget itself, I thought about the deep commitment that many in this church have to MCC—an organization which aids in refugee resettlement and support overseas and which is, in many ways *exists* as a reflection of our conviction that caring for those on the margins is a non-negotiable expression of Christian faith.

I thought about our practice of having fundraiser potlucks throughout the year. When I came to Lethbridge Mennonite nine years ago, I remember being initially confused by this.

So, everyone brings their own food and then pays to eat it together?!

But as I think about this practice alongside Deuteronomy 14, it makes perfect sense. We take from what we have, we come together as a community, we worship, we celebrate, and we set aside money for those in need (whether it's Streets Alive or Camp Valaqua camperships for kids who can't afford it or the Food Bank or whatever).

It may not be quite the celebration that the ancient Israelite pilgrimage festivals were, but these are small responses to the command to come together, to celebrate, to “throw a party,” as it were, and to make sure there’s enough for all.

Overall, as I was reflecting on our practices as a church, I was reminded again how fantastically generous our church is!

And I was actually really encouraged. “We’re doing this,” I thought.

Not perfectly, of course. I think we can always do better. I think our giving can still quite easily devolve into mechanically writing cheques. I think the community aspects of generosity are harder to cultivate in an individualistic society like ours.

But our priorities as a church do reflect God’s priorities in Deuteronomy and throughout the rest of Scripture. This makes me glad. And it makes me grateful.

Ultimately, of course, our generosity is anchored not in a set of laws in the OT but in the nature and character of God.

We live generously because we bear the image of a generous God. A God who has given everything for us. A God who, in Christ, emptied himself of status and reputation, and gave his very life for the sake of the world he loves.

Generosity is in the end an expression of love. And we are to be imitators of the God of love, in whose image we are made.

May God continue to inspire, convict, encourage, and embolden us to be generous givers.

Amen.

