

Gathering In the Fruits©

Exodus 23:10-16; Mark 12:38-44

Nov. 11, 2012

Rev. Sharlyn Gates

What a special day this is, in the life of the congregation! It is a day when we not only make a pledge to commit part of what we have been blessed with to the work of the church for the sake of Christ, but it is a celebration of all the blessings we have – including the fruits that are abundant among us!

For the past several weeks – really even through the summer – most of us have been giving some thought to the Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations. Some of us started early by meeting at Fred's and my home for prayer and discussion on each of the 5 practices that Robert Schnase had written about.

The Session has had the book and been reading and discussing for a few months now. And, starting with the retreat, many of you got onboard and began reading and reflecting on the daily devotions titled "Cultivating Fruitfulness."

That's what an "all-church initiative" is – all the church gets involved in the study, the prayer, the devotions, the reflection and the discussions that follow.

I'm really hoping to hear from some of you about what you thought and how you liked the devotional and the ideas. And today, after worship, we will gather for a celebration lunch to talk about it and to celebrate what we have done.

We are calling it the "Ingathering Banquet" and you all invited even if you did not get a reservation made. We needed reservations to have an idea of how many to prepare for, since it isn't a potluck. But we planned for more, just in case some of you forgot, or even change your mind as you are here today. We want you all to be there!

So why call it an "Ingathering Banquet?" What does that mean, anyway?

We heard Sara read in the lesson from Exodus about the instructions the Israelites were given – instructions for how to tend and harvest the crops for six years, but for the seventh they were to be left unplowed and unused.

Why? So that the poor could come and gather what was there and even the wild animals would get something from it.

And they were to do the same with the vineyards and the olive gardens.

And they were instructed to work for six days but then to rest on the seventh – to give their animals (and their slaves) a rest as well. Everyone who worked needed to be refreshed, just as God did when He created the earth.

And then they were to celebrate 3 Festivals to God:

The Festival of Unleavened Bread, celebrating when they were delivered out of Egypt and they only had time to make unleavened bread.

And the Festival of the Harvest – bringing to God for thanksgiving all the first fruits of the harvest. Whatever they harvested first was the Lord's. It was their tithe that was given out of gratitude for what God had given to them.

And at the end of the year, when they gathered in their crops from the field, they were to celebrate the Festival of Ingathering.

From the early times when God formed a people of His own, it was established that His people would give to God first and that they would give a portion of what they harvested, of their fruits, out of thanksgiving for all God had given them.

Today, we still practice that giving in the church that Jesus established. It is a time to think about and give thanks for all that we have – and what a perfect time for us who are in this country, as we celebrate Thanksgiving and the many blessings we have here in America!

As much as we all might have struggles with jobs and making ends meet, I think every one of us also is aware that we are among the richer in the world. We have so much, compared to so many others. Yes, our struggles are real and are not to be minimized. Yet, we have so many blessings, and are not wanting for much. And for that, we give much thanks!

As a congregation, we have been blessed with much fruit right here at Holly Presbyterian Church. As I've read and lead discussion on the Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations, I have been aware, over and over again, of the fruitfulness we do have.

This congregation is full of many people with great gifts that are shared among us in this ministry. We are active and eager to help others, to learn and to grow and to reach out. This church is abundant with the blessings of spiritual gifts!

It is such a great pleasure to serve as a pastor in a church where the people are so committed to being the church in action!

And so, at our Ingathering Banquet, we are celebrating all those gifts! It is a joy to be together and to enjoy a great meal and good fellowship and to talk about who we are and to give thanks for what God has given us and is calling us to be! We are gathering in our fruits as we give our pledges of money and time and talents to the Lord.

And we will hear from the work teams (I like to call them the "dream teams") about what ideas they have for us that will be specific and intentional in what we do in

ministry as a congregation. We may be strong and active, but we always have room to grow and learn as Christians and as a church!

So this morning we have this special opportunity to make a commitment to the Lord. We have pledge cards available if you did not get one.

You can make a pledge of a financial commitment on this card of whatever you feel led to do. Thing is, no one except one or two who handle our records in a very confidential way, ever sees your card. I don't see it.

Your commitment is entirely between you and God. For me, I truly believe in the tithe. I think the discipline of giving a tenth of my income is a joyful struggle with my Lord – yet He always takes care of me and I have always grown stronger in my trust and my faith. It is nothing to brag about, but it is something to share simply because it is a joy and a journey of struggling and growth that I wish everyone could experience.

Saying that, though, doesn't mean that I would judge anyone for not being in that place. If you feel led by God to tithe but can't be at that place yet financially, don't worry. Give a proportion of your income and work up to it each year with a plan in mind for when and how you might give a full tithe.

But maybe you are just as happy with giving generously the amount you believe is right for you. Paul said to give what you have decided, but give joyously because God loves a cheerful giver.

This day of pledging should be one of joy and thanksgiving! There is no guilt here because giving comes from the depth of our gratitude to God. Giving comes from our relationship to the Lord and knowing we are doing what we can do.

I do like using the pledge card because I consider this pledge a covenant between God and me. By signing my name I am making a contract, a promise to God that I will do my very best to keep this commitment, trusting that my heavenly Father will help me and bless me.

Of course, there are circumstances that come up sometimes that make it impossible to be able to keep that commitment. I believe God understands that and certainly your church family understands it! So, we fill out the card and we sign with all sincerity that we plan on keeping that promise, yet we are assured that it isn't the end the of world if something happens and we just have to change it.

Jesus watched the scribes and the rich putting in those large amounts of money. Yet he was not very impressed with them. They were giving but it wasn't much of a heartfelt, grateful gift. He seemed to think it was more for show than from gratitude and love. He

said they “showed off” their power and riches yet they took advantage of the poor and took everything away from them without concern.

And in comparison, he pointed out a widow, who was so poor she only had 2 pennies. He watched as she put them into the offering. Everything she had, she gave. He was impressed with that gift!

Is Jesus suggesting we put into our offering every last penny we have? I don't think so! I think he is suggesting that our attitude of gratitude counts a lot. And that our trust that God will care for us counts for even more. And that our giving from the heart is worth more than giving for show or just because we have some left that we don't need.

No, I don't think God expects us to give all our money. I just think God expects us to give all of ourselves! To love the Lord our God with all our hearts and all our souls and all our minds and all our strength. To be willing to trust our lives to God.

This morning is a celebration and hopefully a meaningful time to give thanks for our blessings and to gather in our harvest of fruits – our time, talents and treasures to give to the Lord.

What shall I render? The hymnist writes? Shall we give our all?

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