Breaking the Cycle

29/09/24 Canton Uniting Church.

by Tom Arthur.

There is a cartoon going around that looks like it may be from the 1920s or 1930s. There is a typical caricature of a RICH CAPITALIST, overstuffed in his black wool suit, top hat, checked waistcoat, gaiters, cigar. He says, "I got rich through hard work!"

Next to him is standing a skinny worker, dressed in bib overalls, old work boots, a cap, smoking a pipe, who answers, "Whose hard work?"

What the rich capitalist says is the myth we live by. Its the story of independence, self-made-people who do not need anyone other than themselves. It is the story of the individual, the Robinson Crusoe surviving alone on an isolated pacific island, along with the man he names "Friday," who, of course, is Black.

This selfie culture gets more dangerous day by day, evident in the recent election in Austria. Today in our world there is a growing acceptance of autocrats. Fear of the other, of the stranger, and particularly of the asylum seeker fleeing terror elsewhere, has normalised language that people haven't spoken in public since 1930s Germany. Politicians have invented and popularised a new word, "remigration", to talk about sending the strangers back where they came from.

Harvest can easily be compromised by this kind of thinking. In the past, Harvest was the most popular service of the year. Everyone came, and seats of honour were reserved for the biggest landowners and landlords. The labourers were there as well, probably up in the gallery. Large marrows, giant pumpkins and sheafs of wheat celebrated the just reward for hard work.

But the Book of Deuteronomy speaks of a very different way of celebrating HARVEST. Here harvest comes as a gift from God which is to be celebrated by returning the first portion of it in thanksgiving to accomplish God's will in the world. We do this remembering that we were once slaves in the land of Egypt ourselves and that God liberated us to be God's people, so that by our work God's grace may extend throughout the world and the downtrodden.

What Harvest really says, in other words, is what the song we just sang says, that "We are *not* our own". We are made of the earth we till. We are the fruit of many generations, the fruit of the work of many others. We are made of relationships, of family, friends and strangers, made of relationships to people we will never meet. So we have many debts.

We have all experienced how a baby gradually learns who she herself learns to be not by herself alone, but through interaction with others. If that attention, that love, that relationship is withheld, it distorts and cripples that child throughout the rest of her life.

Bread and wine remind us of this corporate identity. As Ephesians tells us, "We are members together". We are one body. We are not our own..

The Heidelberg catechism, the most popular catechism in the 17th century, begins with the question, "What is your greatest comfort in life and in death?" And the answer is, "That I am not my own." I belong to Jesus Christ, and therefore also to my neighbour.

Therefore, we respond in thanksgiving, giving thanks for a life that is not self-constructed but comes like the harvest as gift. This thanksgiving returns the grace received from God in a faith that overflows with what the song calls "liturgies of care", caring for and healing the damage caused by indifference and separation, making others whole by reclaiming them in community.

So we are not alone. We are not alone both in a scientific sense and in a spiritual sense.

Science says that the atoms dancing in space within us are like the galaxies spinning in space six million light years away from us, and that the whole idea of the self is a psychological construction. I am essentially a community. You are a community. We are a community on the most basic level of self-understanding.

Spiritually, in prayer, we discover the debts we owe to our Maker and to one another that bind us together. Most people choose to stand out, desire success and honour and glory. But we follow the way of one who threw his lot in with the condemned, even to the point of sharing their death on a cross, an at-one-ment that revealed the Maker's intention for all creation.

But the story that batters our souls 24/7 says 'I can stand alone'. Marieke and I went to one of those secular funerals a few months ago. They say that Frank Sinatra's "My Way" is the most popular funeral song in the UK, and that's what they played here. But the My Way song was a lie, as it always is. The life of the one we were celebrating was one that connected our community together. He knew everyone up and down the street and as a retired carpenter he was in and out of most of our houses helping us with this and that repair. The service was flat and hollow and meaningless. Marieke and I went home feeling empty.

In his letter to the Romans, chapter 9, Paul says that the will to stand alone and have it my way is like the pot talking back to the potter. Doing it my way is talking back to God. The theologian Paul Tillich says the word "exist" literally means to stand out from all the connectedness at the core of our being. Existence is separation, he says. And the will to act on this separation, to desire it and to construct a life on it is sin.

As a church we stand out from the masses in a different way. This morning we are gathered here as what the New Testament names us, as an *ecclesia,* as the community called out from the crowd, conscious of this connectedness binding us together and celebrating it. As Christians, we call this connectedness the Body of Christ.

We have no other work than to redeem, repair and reconcile a broken world, to welcome the estranged, the lonely, the broken and forgotten, and to speak out against what is dividing us. As the saying goes, our job is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. As the song says, our work is to be a house of welcome.

By its very nature this against-the-grain redemptive work is revolutionary. We speak the truth to the Selfie authorities in our world.

And this HARVEST festival is also revolutionary, or ought to be. The harvest underlines what the Bible says, that all we have, that all we are is from God and belongs to God and needs to be treated so. In Deuteronomy we are shown how to return to God what belongs to God in thanksgiving, a token of the first fruits as a sign of that all belongs to God.

Simon Price of Kensington Baptist Church divides the text of Deuteronomy 26:1-11 into three sections, (1) Thanksgiving, (2) Remembering and (3) Joy, which I will call the three Rs, Returning thanks, Remembering and Rejoicing.

(1) First we return a *portion* of the harvest, as a sign that all has comes from God and belongs to God. When we come into the promised land after all our wandering, we offer the first fruit of the harvest, or the first priority in our budget as a way of returning thanks to God

In a church I once served there was an elderly woman that I used to visit; she was quite wealthy already when her boyfriend died and left her several million. We were trying to encourage members to give proportionately, so that 5 percent of a professional person's salary would be the same as 5 percent of someone on a minimum wage, though different amounts of money. On one visit I endured a heated argument against the idea. She thought it would be a terrible burden on a poor widow on a basic pension.

Jesus was in the Temple one time watching people walking through to drop their contributions off in the offering basket. He called his disciples over to tell them about what he had just seen. Several rich people came by to drop off what you and I would think of as large donations: 50 pounds, 100 pounds, 150 pounds, but were like pocket change to the rich. Then came this poor widow woman who drops in two copper coins that would be worth about 73p in today's money. Who do you think gave the most, Jesus asked his disciples? It was the poor woman who dropped the two copper coins, because she gave all she had.

And it is generally true even today, they say, that in any church the poorest people give the most generously.

In our reading from Deuteronomy the ancient Israelites gave the first fruits of the harvest because all belongs to God. They are returning to God what belongs to God, a token, a symbol of that.

This is not history. Every day is a day where you and I enter into the Promised land, every day we meet life as a fleeting, beautiful gift that comes like a legacy, as if someone we never knew had put us in their will. Life itself comes as such a gift. The air we breathe.

The church I served in Birmingham was in a leafy, upper middle class suburb. The standard understanding was that you left a thousand pounds to the church when you died. And this was generally true. The legacies all came in when they did, at an even thousand pounds.

When we came to Canton Uniting we saw a different story being lived out. I remember particularly hearing about Peter Wilkinson's and Des Hub's legacies, thousands and tens of thousands of pounds. These we can say were gifts from God, as your own giving is from God, from the grace that God has warmed your hearts..

If all belongs to the Lord, then we are called, it is our vocation to budget our talents and our resources appropriately, as belonging to God, so that your stewardship is not just exercised in your giving to the church but in the management of your everyday spending. It all belongs to God. And this goes for our stewardship of the planet. We have not done very well at that.

So we return thanks in returning to God what is God's The second point is remembering. Deuteronomy 26 says that we are to bring our gifts reciting our story: "My father was a wandering Aramean, who went down to Egypt and became a great nation, was oppressed and cried out to the Lord, who heard them and brought them out to be his people and be led into this promised land." This is **MY** father, my oppression and my cry for help.

The Jewish harvest festival is called Sukkot, a week-long celebration that comes alongside the Jewish New Year around this time of year, with Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur. Orthodox Jews will build a flimsy, leaky shelter out in their gardens covered with branches and hung with fruit and vegetables to commemorate their sojourning in the wilderness. They would read these texts of Deuteronomy and the 10 Commandments and how they are to be applied in everyday life, putting themselves in the scene, as it were, making it contemporary, their wandering, their hopes, their new way of life, their blessings, their debts and how to live as God's agents where people are crying out to be seen and heard today.

Harvest says we are to call out oppression just as those slaves did in Egypt. Harvest is revolutionary.

Israel inherited the harvest from the culture they turned against. That old culture was a timeless world in which faith was faith that the world would never change, that harvest came around the same this year as it had always come to them as to their most ancient ancestors, the eternal return of the same-old, same-old. This was an incredibly conservative culture held together by the privileged, the kings and the pharaohs and the princes of the city states. It believed in eternal life, of course, but only for the elite, for whose tombs, considered entry points to that eternal life, were constructed at great public expense and immense suffering in the labouring slave population. The same hierarchy, the same oppression, the privilege, the injustice prevailed without change.

Then came the revolution. For the Hebrews, which means the dusty ones, the harvest celebrated a continuity that had become unbearable. So they broke the cycle to enter a whole new understanding of time as historical, not cyclical but linear, pointing toward reform wherever there was injustice and revolution when everything got tied up again in power and privilege.

They were given the Decalogue to guide them in the ways of justice, equity, respect for the stranger, righteousness toward neighbour, just as we have it today as a guide to faith in practice.

So we come to the third R, *rejoicing.* First, we had the act of returning thanks, then the ritual of remembering and now, in the end, we have the Levite and the foreigner rejoicing in

verse 11. The Levites were like full-time unpaid deacons, living off what we brought in our offerings,, doing the work of the church as it were, called and supported by us to work on our behalf.

The foreigners, the sojourners, were the people Donald Trump says are eating our neighbours' cats. The way we live, our faithfulness, our prayers, our disciplined practices enabled them to rejoice, enabled people we will never know to rejoice. This is what harvest is. It turns the world upside down. Or perhaps right-side up. We don't make that happen by giving until it hurts. We learn to give until it feels good, carried into tomorrow by the grace of God.