

# First Fruits

## Deuteronomy 26:1-11

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There is a story that is told in many cultures concerning heaven and hell. In hell, all the inhabitants are seated at long tables with beautiful white tablecloths, the finest silver, and a bounty of delicious food in front of them. But no one is eating. In fact, the people are wailing and crying with hunger. Why? None of the people can bend their arms at their elbows. Although they can reach the food, they cannot bring it to their mouths, and so they are starving. Ironically, heaven is exactly the same scene, with the tablecloths and silver and a bounty of food. In heaven no one is able to bend their arms either. But no one is crying, no one is wailing, no one is going hungry. Why? In heaven the people are reaching out and feeding each other. There is so much I like about that story. But it makes me wonder, what would happen if people could bend their arms? What would happen if people could feed themselves? Would they still reach across the table and feed each other?

Deuteronomy 26 tells a story of a people who are blessed with a rich and bountiful harvest. They are settled in a land that the bible describes as flowing with milk and honey, the Promised Land. They have been given the gift of living in safety and security. And, their arms bend. They can feed themselves. But even though they are able to feed and take care of themselves, something happens in Deuteronomy 26 that might not be heaven, but it sure feels like a taste of heaven. These people who can bend their arms and take care of themselves choose to straighten out their arms and share their gifts and their bounty and their blessings with others.

A few weeks ago I traveled with Julie and a team of volunteers on a medical mission to Guatemala. It wasn't a particularly vigorous trip, but still, everyone who went was in fairly good health and able to do normal physical tasks. What I mean is each one was able to bend their arms. They could easily feed themselves, take care of themselves, grab hold of and bring things right into their own lap. But for this week each and every person on the team chose to straighten their arms out and to share. No one was forced to do it. They simply chose to stretch out their arms and share.

We spent four days in two local villages, as our medical team set up in local schools. People would be lined up when we arrived for our 8 am start. Some had been in line for hours before we arrived. Upon entering, their first stop was triage, where our Spanish speakers would listen to their needs and then direct them to the appropriate clinic. We had clinics for General Medicine, Pediatrics, Gynecology, Dermatology, Dental, VIA Cryo (testing for and treating cervical cancer right there on the spot), and Referrals, the process of identifying those who needed further attention or surgery and would be sent to one of the main hospitals. Over the course of those four days our team saw 2, 237 patients. There was quite a bit of stretching

out of arms to share in a variety of ways. None of it was forced. People simply chose to stretch out their arms and share. And it did have a little bit of the feel of heaven, to see such glad and generous sharing.

The last day we were in village, which was a Thursday, I was able to sit back and take in an incredible scene. In many ways it was a taste of heaven, as I saw people extending their arms in love and compassion, extending practical help and powerful healing. Or maybe I saw a modern day enactment of Deuteronomy 26, that wonderful offering of firstfruits and tithes when the people of God brought in the fruit of their harvest and instead of bending their arms and feeding themselves reached out and shared with glad and generous hearts.

Can you imagine the sense of excitement when that first harvest came in? There must have been quite a buzz as those Israelites all started making their way to the city gates to bring their offerings. What started as a trickle became a steady stream and then a torrent and finally a mighty rush. Baskets full of barley and wheat and baked bread and cakes and dates and figs and olive and grapes just kept coming through the city gates. The people had been through so much. You can hear it in their testimony. They remembered way back to Abraham, long before they had a home, when all of this present abundance was nothing more than a promise from God. “My father was a wandering Aramean,” said these children of Abraham. Oh what a journey they had been on. “He went down to Egypt and we became a great and powerful nation.” But things turned sour. “The Egyptians mistreated and made us suffer, putting us to hard labor.” Then the people cried out to the Lord and the Lord heard their cry. “The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.” And not only did the Lord bring them out of Egypt, it was the Lord who gave them everything they had, the bounty, the blessing, the land, and the love. “The Lord brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.” These Israelites, these children of God, who had been blessed so abundantly now returned their blessings to God, baskets filled to overflowing. “And now I bring the firstfruits of the soil that you, O Lord, have given me.” Of course their arms could bend. But now in gratitude and with great joy they straightened their arms out and shared both generously and joyfully.

So there I was that last day we were in village, and our team streamed through the gates and took up their positions. And then the people from the village entered, and they were greeted with open arms....

With extended arms....

With welcoming arms...

With giving arms....

With sharing arms.

With embracing arms.

Was it a taste of heaven? Was it a modern day manifestation of Deuteronomy 26? Whatever it was we were able to agree with the one who said, “Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place.”

How did the group extend their arms? It was a medical mission, with many doctors and nurses. Dr. Sam Li described the medical help he was able to give. *“When people ask me how I help as an internist on a medical mission, I tell them that I see patients who otherwise don't have access to health care and get them medications for illnesses such as diabetes and hypertension. In a country where healthcare is scarce, and resources are extremely limited, providing such a service greatly improves the health of the people we see. However, we provide a much greater service by listening to their stories, showing we care, and educating them. No amount of medication is going to cure diabetes, but giving them an understanding of how to live, what to eat, how much to exercise and even taking the time to explain why they need to take their meds is far more precious than giving medication alone. In return they pay for our service with heartfelt appreciation in the form of handshakes, hugs, and kisses. The greatest thing you can do is to serve those in need, and that's how I get to help on the medical mission.”*

Sometimes we extended our arms and were able to give something practical, like a cane to an elderly woman. Julie was working in the pharmacy, and one of the responsibilities within the pharmacy was to distribute canes to those who need them. *“For 16 years I have loved the people of Guatemala! At every turn there have been celebrations, however, I think today was the greatest! A 100-year-old woman, beautiful but withered by her years, came in to our clinic. Her companion was a simple but worn walking stick. We presented her with a beautiful new cane, and her reaction was priceless! She belly laughed for at least 10 minutes! I had a glimpse of Sarah from the bible, when she learned at a ripe old age that she was pregnant! God is good!”*

One of our doctors worked with an 8-year-old patient named Luis. Luis has spina bifida, a condition that has left him unable to walk on his own, so his mother Jessie carries him everywhere, even though he already weighs 50 pounds. Despite the serious nature of his medical condition, there were some positives in the situation: Luis has enough muscle tone in his legs and ankles to stand and pick up his legs with the help of a walker. A team member who was present when Luis tried out his new walker said his face lighted up with a big smile as he took a few practice steps around the pediatric clinic with the doctor's help. In addition to the walker, Luis has been referred for physical therapy and leg braces which should significantly improve his mobility.

Many of you were able to meet our good friends Phil and Linda Johnson when they came last June for our installation. They are the team leaders for this medical mission, and Phil, a physician, is in his element as he oversees all the medical staff. Linda has learned Spanish and she sits all day at triage, meeting the people as they come in, welcoming them, listening, and helping them move to the appropriate area. We got back to our hotel one night and Linda shared the following. *Sometimes you discover you are in exactly the right place at exactly the right time... My new 15-year-old friend, Fatima, sat down across from me in triage today and said "I have scoliosis." And I said "I do too." After she saw the doctor and was referred for surgery--the same surgery I had nearly 20 years ago--I was able to reassure her that she would be able to run and walk and dance after her surgery.* That story is such an important one. Many times the offerings we are able to bring, the ways we are able to extend our arms and share with others, are a direct result of difficult things we have experienced, suffering, loss, hardship, trials, and tribulations. We were with Linda when she had that surgery nearly 20 years ago, and it was a grueling and painful surgery. But because of what she went through there came a day 20 years later when she knew she was at exactly the right spot at the right time as she extended her arms to a fearful young girl and let her know it was going to be okay.

We worked alongside many staff and volunteers from Guatemala. Our bus drivers not only drove us to and from the village, when we were in the village they jumped in and helped wherever they could. Lugo was helping at the Pharmacy when Julie said she saw something really touching. Lugo was helping an elderly patient learn how to use their walker. Instead of simply explaining how to use the walker with words, Lugo extended his arms and his hands, grabbed hold of the hands of the elderly person, placed them on the handle bars of the walker, and then guided them for their first few steps. Julie said it was as if God was giving a precious reminder that his hands are upon us every single day, guiding our steps and leading us on our path.

Something takes place in Deuteronomy 26 with the offering of the firstfruits that not everyone notices. We can't miss the pageantry and the pomp as basket after basket is brought in, nor does the great joy of the offering escape our attention. But what we might miss is the ones to whom the offering is directed. Obviously the offering is for God, for God is the one who has provided all the bounty. And yet that is not where the offering ends up, in the hands of God. Deuteronomy 26:12 tells us, "When you have finished setting aside a tenth of all your produce...you shall give it to the Levite (the priests), the alien, the fatherless and the widow." This joyful offering so filled with gratitude is not given to our own inner circle of friends and it is not shared among ourselves. It is given to the alien, the foreigner, the outsider, the stranger, and to the vulnerable, the widow and the fatherless. When we realize the expansiveness of love being shared in the offering of firstfruits we might well think this is a vision of heaven.

The passage from Romans 10 that was read earlier in worship refers to the expansive love God has shown through Jesus Christ. Because God has given the gift of love through Jesus to all people there is no longer any difference between Jew and Gentile. Dividing walls and barriers and boundaries and borders are wiped away with Jesus Christ. The firstfruits offering calls for the people of God to extend their arms and spread God's love to the outsiders, the ones on the margins, and the vulnerable.

Can you imagine what joy it brought me to look out at our team, working so well together you would have thought they were poster children for the Body of Christ, each one gifted in their own unique way, extending their arms to share those gifts? I saw that for those few days it was as if God had brought his whole wide world into one small global village. A team of people from our country had traveled to Guatemala, crossing boundaries and borders. In Guatemala we worked among ones of Spanish descent and ones from the ancient Indian cultures and ones who represent a mixing and joining of these cultures. Not only that, we also had an incredibly diverse group of team members. Sam was born in China, Sharon in Korea, Tina and Grace had roots in India, Twyla is Nicaraguan, Joe and Rebekah are from El Salvador, Sonia's family is from Mexico, Bernie is from Canada, and Tram is from Vietnam. It was as if a global village came to life with people from the farthest reaches and each and every person had one thing in common: Even though their arms bent just fine, they all had their arms extended.

One of the young female physicians had been born in another country and come to the United States as a young child. We talked one day and she told me of coming to the states as a young girl, not able to speak any English. Not surprisingly she was teased, but she persevered and then excelled in academics and is now a respected doctor. She did so much to help our team during the week, but that last day she started a game. Clinic was winding down and a few girls that had taken a liking to her were hanging around outside the door. This young doctor who had been teased as a child came out and she started a game with these little girls, clapping hands together and counting in English. The smiles on the faces of those little girls, and by little girls I mean the ones from Guatemala and the one from Vietnam who is now an adult but still has the heart of a child, well let's just say it gave me one more reason to wonder if I was seeing a vision of Deuteronomy 26...or was it a glimpse, a glimmer, a tiny little glance of what heaven will be like. Each time this young physician would reach out to meet the hands of the beautiful little girls she had to do something, she had to extend her arms. And each time she did her face beamed with delight.

Sharon is a young dermatologist from Korea. She wrote about her experience:

*Even though this was my very first mission trip, I did not have many expectations. However, I did not realize that I was going to deal with so many feet on this trip. From onychomycosis to warts to ingrown nails to ulcers, the derm team*

*had to face many Guatemalans' feet. As a dermatologist who always avoided nail avulsions in clinic, I could not help but feel a deep sense of impending doom when patients complained of pain in their feet.*

*However, as I washed the feet of my patients, I reflected on Jesus, our Lord and savior. He humbled Himself to serve us though He is the son of God! He washed the feet of his disciples and then asked them to do the same for others. Though my flesh battled against me, my spirit rejoiced that I was taking part in God's love by caring for His beloved children. Jesus was right again when he said "Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them." (John 13:16-17 NIV)*

Sharon's words help us connect the offering of firstfruits with the faith of Christians. In Deuteronomy 26 the people look back at all God has done for them and in response they offer their gifts, they extend their arms. We, the ones called Christians, the disciples, the followers of Jesus, look back at all he has done for us, and hasn't he done everything for us. Long before we extended our arms he extended his. His arms worked just fine. He was the Son of God and he knew how to bend his arms. He could have grabbed all power and authority and worship and honor to his own side. But he emptied himself. He extended his arms and he extended himself. He did it with every person he met, and as our friend Sharon reminded us, he extended his arms when he washed the feet of his disciples. But even that does not show us the full extent of his love. It was when he extended his arms on the cross, when he stretched his arms out wide enough to cover the sin of the this world, to cover the brokenness of this world, to wrap this hurting world in his arms of love, when he extended his arms on the cross he showed us the full extent of God's love.

One morning while we were in Guatemala we were out early walking when we found a woman selling something that immediately reminded us of God's love. And it reminded us of the work we were doing in Guatemala. And it reminded us of you, our family of faith here at Dunn's Corners. We found a woman selling some tiny crosses. Those crosses tell us of a God who extended his arms. And because his arms have reached us, embraced us, covered us, and cleansed us, we live our lives together as a church, as a community of faith, as the Body of Christ, extending our arms in every way we can. Of course we know how to bend our arms and take care of ourselves. But with Jesus as our example, we learn to extend our arms in love.