

"The Tomato Wars Revisited"

Deut. 26:1-11
Luke 4:1-13

February 21, 2010
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(In 1982 I was hired by Mission Presbytery to organize a new Presbyterian church in San Antonio. After the church was organized, the congregation called me as the first pastor of Northminster Presbyterian Church. It might be more accurate to say that God planted and grew a new church in San Antonio and I was along for the ride. Starting a new church is hard work yet immensely rewarding. Generally, I enjoyed my decade in Texas as the pastor of a new church. Generally, I found Texans to be quite likeable.

Texas and Texans have their own special charm. At one point in the early development of the United States, Texas, the Lone Star State, was not a state but it was a separate nation. Did you know that? Maybe that gives some meaning to one of the funnier bumper stickers I read while living in Texas: *"Welcome to Texas! Now, go home!"*

In 1991 I received an invitation from the Pastor Nominating Committee and the Executive Presbyter of Denver Presbytery, Hank Blunk, to be the Designated Pastor of a new church development called St. Paul Presbyterian. The church had been founded five years earlier by Mac MacFerran and he was retiring.

When I accepted the invitation and moved from San Antonio to Denver, I stumbled upon the animosity that exists between Coloradans and Texans. It may have had something to do with Texans who annually invaded the ski slopes of Colorado and acted a little too big for their britches. Coloradans, unhappy about sharing their coveted, pristine ski slopes with the braggadocios Texans would say, *"If God wanted Texans to ski, God would have given them a mountain!"*

Out of the animosity between Texans and Coloradans grew an annual event in Colorado. It is called, "The Tomato Wars." Once a year, people from the two states gather at a prearranged site. A line is drawn in the sand. Coloradans stand on one side of the line, the Texans on the other. Then, the two groups begin hurling red, ripe tomatoes at each other. Sounds kind of fun to me! It is a rather nonviolent way for people from two states to express their dislike for one another.

Good-natured tomato wars were not in the picture for the Israelites in today's text from the Hebrew Bible. Something much more traumatic happened as the Israelites crossed a border and found themselves in another nation.

THE ISRAELITES BECAME ILLEGAL ALIENS IN EGYPT AND WERE FORCED INTO HUMAN SLAVERY. THIS PIECE OF ISRAEL'S HISTORY PLAYED A CRITICAL ROLE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEIR RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND BEHAVIORS. JEWISH CREEDS AND RITES WERE FORGED IN THE HUMAN TALE OF SUFFERING. AFTER THE CHOSEN PEOPLE WANDERED IN THE DESERT FOR FORTY YEARS. IN THE EXODUS FROM EGYPT AND THE ENTRY INTO THE PROMISED LAND, THEY FOUND IT HELPFUL TO RETELL THE STORY. THEY HAD BEEN SLAVES IN EGYPT. GOD DELIVERED THEM FROM SLAVERY AS MOSES LED THE PEOPLE THROUGH THE WILDERNESS. THEY INHERITED A LAND "FLOWING WITH MILK AND HONEY".

Verse 5 in chapter 26 of Deuteronomy is key in their remembering, "*A wandering Aramean was my ancestor, he went down to Egypt and lived there as an alien. . .*" The Hebrew people are reciting and remembering the story of their patriarch, Jacob, who wandered in the desert and ended up in Egypt as a slave. Few in number, this alien nation of people grew in captivity and was forced into slavery. God's Chosen were in Egypt and were a people without a land to call "home" or any legal rights. They had been reduced to pawns and possessions.

Whereas Texans shout, "*Remember the Alamo!*" as they rehearse in their memory the epic battle between American and Mexican soldiers in the mission in San Antonio, the Hebrews cry out, "*Remember when we were slaves down in Egypt and God brought us out of there and into a land flowing with milk and honey.*"

ONE OF THE MORE IMPORTANT RELIGIOUS RITES THAT GREW OUT OF THE ISRAELITES' REMEMBERING THEIR SLAVERY AND THEIR SALVATION IS THE "FIRST FRUITS OFFERING". THE HEBREWS HAD BEEN INSTRUCTED TO SHOW THEIR GRATITUDE TO GOD FOR DELIVERING THEM BY TAKING SOME OF THE BEST OF THEIR CROPS TO THE CENTRAL SANCTUARY AND GIVING AS AN ACT OF GRATEFUL MEMORY.

"First fruits" giving is the practice of taking the first part of the farmer's crop or produce to the sanctuary, giving it to the priests, and dedicating it to God and God's use.

We no longer live in an agricultural economy where crops and produce are the currency or money that had purchasing power. So our practice, as Christians, is to bring our gifts and offerings to church in dimes and dollars as an act of our remembering and our gratitude.

First-fruits giving and the tithe have their roots in the memory and gratitude of God's people surrounding the Exodus experience.

THE OTHER IMPORTANT RELIGIOUS RITE WHICH GREW OUT OF THE EXPERIENCE OF THE WANDERING ISRAELITES WAS THE "THIRD YEAR TITHE". THE THIRD YEAR TITHE IS DIFFERENT FROM THE FIRST FRUITS OFFERING. EVERY THREE YEARS, AFTER THE ISRAELITES ENTERED AND CLAIMED THE PROMISED LAND, THEY TOOK TEN PERCENT OF THEIR CROPS AND PRODUCE AND DISTRIBUTED THEM TO THE POOR, THE WIDOWS, THE STRANGERS AND THE ALIENS WITHIN THEIR LAND.

Verse 12 in chapter 26 of Deuteronomy says that God's Chosen People, the Israelites, gave ten percent of their crops and produce to "*the Levites, the resident aliens, the widows, and the orphans so that they may eat their fill in your towns.*" And that was not all. Then the Israelites went to the temple and reported to the priests what they had done in caring for others with the Three Year Tithe.

Deeply within our Judeo-Christian history and collective memory lives the concept of "borderless hospitality". Care for the stranger, widow, orphan, alien in your midst for you too were once an alien in a strange land. You too were once in slavery and bondage. This is a word from God that the church needs to say in a country like ours where anti-immigrant sentiment runs so high. It is a word the church needs to speak to a nation where the poor are mistreated and minimized in "a land of plenty".

(The years I lived in Texas and Arizona, and the trips we took across the border to Mexico, really opened my eyes to the hardships of migrants who cross the border north in search of jobs and a better way of life.

There are humanitarian groups on both sides of the border that patrol the desert in search of people in distress. On a mission trip in Mexico we stopped at the Grupo Beta outside of Nogales, Sonora. The Grupo Beta, federal employees, take Jeeps into the desert, rescue people who need water and medical attention, or recover the dead. While we were there at the Grupo facility we U.S. Presbyterians interviewed, through an interpreter, a young husband, wife, and baby who had been rescued after they had been robbed and brutally beaten south of the border on their way into the U.S. It is very common for coyotes and human smugglers to be paid an enormous price, then to rob, beat, rape, and abandon people in the desert. Read the book, *The Devil's Highway*, to get a chilling glimpse into the dangers of a hostile desert that people are desperate to cross to find "the promised land".)

The experience of living on the border confronted me with the question, "*Am I my brother's keeper?*" Who is my brother and sister?)

There is an ethos of "borderless hospitality" in the Jewish and Christian faith. I believe it is there, too, if you look for it in the Muslim religion. Jews, Christians, and Muslims say, "*A Wandering Aramean was my father . . .*"

Memory of our history plays a huge part in our religious devotion as God's people. We have all been immigrants. We have been down to Egypt and experienced slavery or bondage. We too have been delivered by the grace and goodness of God.

So we can recite the creeds and practice the religious rites of "first fruits giving" and "third year tithing" because it reminds us who we are and whose we are. We are God's Chosen. We belong to God.

And we treat those people from another land and place who are within our borders and within our church, with generous hospitality and deep respect. We make sure "*the Levite, the resident alien, the widow, and the orphan*" are well fed and given comfortable accommodations. Why? Because we too have been resident aliens in a strange land. We too have been orphans and widows and Levites. And God has rescued us.

All praise and thanks be to God!