

Rev. Lisa Schrott
November 16, 2025
Deuteronomy 26: 1-11
We Belong to God: Gratitude

Our scripture reading this morning comes from the book of Deuteronomy, the fifth book of the Bible and the final book of the Torah. The central theme in Deuteronomy is the covenant between God and Israel. This covenant is the manner by which the Hebrew people understand that they *belong to God*. The covenant between God and the people is made known through God's guiding of the people from slavery in Egypt into a new homeland in Canaan. It is made known through the laws and teaching God shares through Moses, a prophet and spiritual leader. It is made known through the formation of community on a long and winding journey through the wilderness.

As the Hebrew people are about to enter Canaan, Moses delivers a series of speeches to prepare them for the next phase of their life together, a life he will not be part of, as he hands the leadership to Joshua. These speeches are important because those that will be entering Canaan are not the same people as those who left Egypt. The first generation has died off and this second generation doesn't have the personal remembrances of their life in bondage, their life before they tasted freedom, their life before the Lord God was leading them by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. In these speeches, Moses calls the next generation of Israel to be faithful to their covenant with God – faithful through their words and deeds, faithful in their worship practices, and faithful through their gratitude as they remember that they belong to God. Hear now these words from Deuteronomy 26:

“When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess and you possess it and settle in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time and say to him,

‘Today I declare to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us.’

When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God, you shall make this response before the Lord your God:

‘A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an

outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me.'

You shall set it down before the Lord your God and bow down before the Lord your God. Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house. **The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

What does gratitude look like? I saw a recent article that described what it looked like to people in Topraktepe and ancient Eirenopolis in the 7th–8th centuries C.E., towns located in Turkey's Karaman province. Archaeologists researching in this area have uncovered five carbonized loaves of bread. Four of the loaves were imprinted with the Maltese Cross signifying their use for communion. One of the loaves was stamped with an image of Jesus and a Greek inscription that reads, "With gratitude to the blessed Jesus."

Now I know what you are thinking ... well what I was thinking when I read about this...I can't get a freshly made loaf of bread to last more than a week, and how did they get bread to last more than 1300 years. And I was thinking that those churches really needed a better communion clean-up crew. Well it turns out that "carbonized loaves" are ancient loaves of bread that have been preserved by being charred into a dark, stone-like state. In this case researchers point to a rare chain of events: intense heat charred the loaves, then low-oxygen burial and stable temperatures preserved surface details, including the inscription and stamped imagery.

What astounded the archeologists the most was not that they found these loaves intact. Rather it was the iconography on the loaf stamped with the image of Jesus. Instead of the typical image favored at this time of a majestic Christ – think of an icon image of Christ with gold around his head and looking downward with benevolent gaze – the bread had an image of Jesus as a sower or farmer "an agrarian motif that would have spoken directly to local communities whose faith, labor, and lands were intertwined."¹

A commentary on the finding from the Roman Catholic newsletter *Aleteia* had a lovely reflection on the implication of this finding: "Stamping gratitude into dough before baking turned a staple into a proclamation: God provides; we give thanks. Even the charred crusts preach across time about dependence, generosity, and the way worship can be kneaded into common life."²

¹ Kaleena Fraga (edited By John Kuroski). Archaeologists In Turkey Just Found Intact 1,300-Year-Old Bread Bearing The Image Of Jesus. *All That is Interesting*; October 10, 2025. Online at <https://allthatsinteresting.com/turkey-medieval-jesus-bread-loaf>

² Daniel Esparza. Ancient "communion bread" with Jesus image found in Turkey

That sentiment is the take home message of our stewardship campaign this year *We Belong to God*. Our theme recognizes our dependence on God for all that we have been, the shoulders on which we stand from our Biblical ancestors through those who belief and faith birthed this congregation in 1964 and nurtured this congregation through its infancy, childhood, adolescence and into a long and energetic adulthood. *We Belong to God* recognizes our dependence on God today – this very day – as each of sitting here and those joining us online - seek to cultivate and sustain the lifelong journey of faith that is life in Jesus Christ. And we look to the future... *We Belong to God* embraces that we invite others, families, friends, and yes strangers, to experience welcome, healing, justice and peace with our PCO family.

This past, present and future narrative fueled those who listened to Moses' words in Deuteronomy that we heard this morning. *God provides; we give thanks. Even the charred crusts preach across time about dependence, generosity, and the way worship can be kneaded into common life.*

Much of Moses teaching in Deuteronomy is focused on what it means to live in covenant with God. At its heart, Moses kneads a common life through teaching about dependence on God, generosity as a response, and worship as a posture of life. Moses retells the story of receiving the Decalogue – the Ten Commandments in chapter 5 of Deuteronomy and then in his speeches, he digs deeper into what living out these commandments looks like. Old Testament scholar Brent Strawn reflects that Deuteronomy 26 is a deepening and extension of the Tenth Commandment – thou shall not covet. It extends the commandment to include our own belongings and our own resources. It is not enough that we don't desire what others have and take things from them for ourselves. The Tenth Commandment also pushes us to give of our treasures to others. Strawn refers to this practice as letting go of "coveting our own goods." We covet our own goods when we fail to recognize the gifts we have belong to someone else – that is God.³

Moses told the people that the land they were to inhabit was a gift from God and their response is to give the first fruits of that land as offering back to God: "When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess and you possess it and settle in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name."

One of the most beautiful pieces of spiritual practice that Moses commands in this passage is that this offering is to be shared with strangers, the foreigners among us so that all may eat

Aleteia. October 15, 2025; Online at <https://aleteia.org/2025/10/15/ancient-communion-bread-with-jesus-image-found-in-turkey/>

³ Brent Strawn. Deuteronomy. *Theological Bible Commentary*. Ed by. Gail R. O'Day and David L. Peterson. Westminster John Knox, 2009; 72-73.

their fill. The New Revised Standard translation we use in worship uses the term “alien.” The Hebrew root can also be translated as a sojourner, temporary dweller, or a new-comer. And while I was tempted to soften the language because “alien” is a politically charged word, in this case I think the harsher connotation is part of the point Moses is trying to make. He is reminding the Hebrew people that at one time in their past, they were treated as aliens. They were viewed as lesser than and treated harshly by the political leaders of the day. They cried out from a place of injustice and the Lord heard their voice and saw their affliction, their toil, and their oppression. The Lord brought them out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders. While they are now about ready to enter Canaan, a land Moses describes as flowing with milk and honey, they are to remember that they were once the stranger, the sojourner, the new-comer, the alien in a harsh land. And Moses tells them: You shall set your [offering] down before the Lord your God and bow down before the Lord your God. Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.” We will emulate this practice next week with our Agape meal. This is what we do as a people of faith. We celebrate all the bounty that the Lord our God has given to us and to our community.

During the past several weeks we have heard the *why* of our Stewardship campaign – the *why* we give of our time and talents and treasures – because in life and in death and in life beyond death, we belong to God. We heard from Amira Coleman about the ways our operating budget provides for our worship that glorifies God through the support of our MSU scholarship singers. Christine Meland shared how our budget encourages our youth to engage with God through participation in the Montreat youth conference in Black Mountain, NC. Paula Frantz shared how the funds in our budget assist GIL, the Global Institute of Lansing, support new-comers to our area earn a high school diploma. And last week Barbara Fretwell-Cooke shared how the Board of Deacons is building a network of caring relations through the Visitation Ministry.

These are only a fraction of the stories we can share about the ways PCO lives out its mission in this world. These are only a glimpse of the way God is calling us right now and in the future to be

- A welcoming congregation where meaningful connections are made.
- A congregation that is intergenerationally inclusive.
- A congregation actively building partnerships.

Today we have an opportunity to share our gratitude for all that we are and all that we will become as we dedicate our gifts of time, talent, and financial resources to the church. The financial funds pledged help us to make a realistic budget and plan for the ways we invite everyone to join the lifelong journey of faith that is life in Jesus Christ. They will provide for our ministries of worship, faith formation, mission, facility stewardship and care. The gifts we share will help us grow and expand our ministry to families and young adults and those in

homebound or in care facilities. They will help to welcome the newcomer to the area and reduce food and housing insecurity and provide electricity through solar panels to schoolgirls in Kenya. They will help keep our facility in good shape so we are able to share this incredible resource with others. The gifts we share will support our worship that glorifies God. We may not have 1300-year-old communion bread with the imprint of Jesus, the farmer. But we do understand the charred crusts of life. We understand that we are better together. And we give thanks that the *charred crusts of our life preach across time about dependence, generosity, and our common life, because in life and in death and life beyond death, we belong to God.*

We started our Stewardship series reciting a portion of the Heidelberg Catechism that proclaims that our only comfort in life and in death is that we belong to God. We will close out the series with the opening of the PC(USA) Brief Statement of Faith. This Statement was written as the Northern and Southern branches of the Presbyterian Church reunited to become the PC(USA) in 1983. This statement was not intended to delineate all the beliefs of the church, rather to celebrate our rediscovery that for all our undoubted diversity, we are bound together by a common faith and a common task. Let us join our voices together in sharing these words.

Affirmation of Faith Brief Statement of Faith (11.1), *PC(USA) Book of Confessions*

In life and in death we belong to God. Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel, whom alone we worship and serve.