

A) Introduction: What is the Harvest Offering and What is the Harvest?

Today we come together to offer thanks to God for all that God has given to us this past year. We offer thanks through our worship in song, in prayer, in hearing of Scripture and in allowing God's Word to work in our hearts. But most importantly today we offer thanks through a special offering time, giving back a portion of what God has given to us over the last year. We call this our annual Harvest offering.

The Harvest Offering was started during a time when more of our congregation was made up of farmers. During harvest, Oak Grove farmers would bring a portion of their crop and was collected at the to the grain elevators in town, sell it, and then donate the money to Mennonite Central committee in order to meet the needs of others around the world. Also throughout the year, MCC had a mobile

canning unit that would come to West Liberty and people would gather, cut up meat from cows they had raised, and can the meat to be donated to MCC and given to meet needs.

As the makeup of our congregation has changed and the way that Mennonite Central Committee meets needs has changed, the idea of 'Harvest' is no longer focused on a physical collection of what we've grown, but instead a financial representation of what God has blessed us with over the last year.

However, this is still a perfect time of year to consider the ways in which God has 'grown' us over the past year as we prepare to celebrate Thanksgiving this week. We are reminded of the blessings that God has given to us, and so we come together we to give those blessings back to others.

Transition:

Using the harvest as an opportunity to give to others is a practice that was established by God all the way back in the law books of the Old Testament, specifically in Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

B) Biblical Connection: The Harvest was a Tool of Generosity

The harvest season is a special and exciting time for farmers to reap the rewards of their labor throughout the growing season. What is harvested, depending on weather of course, represents the skills and hard efforts of the farmers and is used as income and food for the family throughout the rest of the year. A lump sum is given for the corn or beans gathered that has to be carefully planned, saved, and spent throughout the year, which is very different way of thinking than life for us who receive a monthly or bi-monthly check. Because a farmer's livelihood is based on what

they are able to gather in the harvest, the yield of every acre becomes very important.

God shows us in Scripture, however, that the harvest was an opportunity to share our bounty with others and that although the farmer may have paid for the land, paid for the seed, worked the ground with his or her sweat, blood, and tears, they still had an obligation to share what they had grown with those around them who did not have the privilege of being able to grow food.

Gleaning was the practice of allowing the poor of the area to gather up any crops that had been missed or intentionally left behind by the farmers. We see this practice played out in the book of Ruth.

It would not have been easy to be a woman during Bible times. You did not own anything and your livelihood and security relied

completely on your husband. If your husband happened to die before you did, everything that you had would legally be passed on to the next of male kin. You yourself were considered a possession, and so by right a male brother or cousin could marry you and take over the burden of caring for you. But if you were not married and were a widow, then you had very little rights to property, and job, or any way of stable income to put food on the table. In the book of Ruth, Naomi lost her husband and two sons within a short period of time and was left to care for her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, who were foreigners. Knowing that she would not remarry and feeling that it was unlikely these two women would find Hebrew husbands, she urged them to go back to their homeland where they were more likely to find safety and security in their people. Orpah left, with Naomi's blessing, but Ruth committed to stay with Naomi and to make the Hebrew people her people. Because she could not

work, in order to get food for them to eat, Ruth went into the fields, following the farmers as they were harvesting, and gleaned the crops left behind.

According to **Ruth 2:2-3** ² *And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favor." Naomi said to her, "Go ahead, my daughter."* ³ *So she went out, entered a field and began to glean behind the harvesters. As it turned out, she was working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelek."* As the story continues, Boaz was very generous with his harvest to not only allow Ruth to glean from the grain left behind but to give her extra. Ruth ends up marrying Boaz, cousin to her deceased husband, and they give birth to a son Obed, who would give birth to Jesse, who would give birth to King David. And further down the line, came Jesus.

Gleaning was a practice of generosity. It was also something that continued to be practiced by Jewish farmers beyond the Bible, and there were extra rabbinical laws written not only about not intimidating those that would come behind with dogs or lions, but also not to help those who would be coming behind to glean. Gleaning was also practiced in Europe and there were legal rights for landless persons to glean farmers' fields at certain times of the day, although that practice ended in the 18th century. Today, organizations work with restaurants and grocery stores to take and distribute nearly-expired or expired foods that are still edible but cannot be sold. On the third Wednesday of every month, the Second Harvest Food Bank parks a truck at the West Liberty UMC and gives out perishable foods gleaned from restaurants and grocery stores to anyone interested who lives in Logan County.

Transition: God established the practice of gleaning in the law books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. What is interesting is that the laws regarded gleaning were placed alongside of holiness codes and commands regarding special religious holidays. Why did God command harvest gleaning as a practice equal to some of the most holy laws in the Old Testament?

Three reasons:

1. Harvest gleaning was an act of Holy obedience to the law.

Leviticus 19:9-10 ⁹ When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. ¹⁰ You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the LORD your God

The laws in Leviticus 19 represent God's call for us to be holy and to love our neighbors. It includes things such as respect for parents, not making idols, not stealing, not lying, and not swearing falsely. And in the midst of this, God includes a command on gleaning.

Biblical scholar Joe M. Sprinkle writes that this practice of gleaning was Israel's "welfare system." It was a legal way to make sure that land owning farmers provided for those not fortunate enough to own land. John J. Collins writes that "Holiness is not only a matter of being separated from the nations. It also requires ethical behavior toward one's fellow human beings." Giving generously of the things that we have earned for the sake of others who have less is an act of Holy Obedience to God's law, in the same way that we are called to not to hold grudges, not to slander, and not to pervert justice.

2. The Harvest gleaning was an act of worship.

In **Leviticus 23**, God is describing a specific festival called the Festival of Weeks, which is known as Pentecost in the New Testament. According to **v. 22**, as a part of this festival: *When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am the Lord your God.*

The Festival of Weeks was linked to the harvest as a way to acknowledge how God has blessed the people agriculturally that year and to pray for His future blessings. As a gesture of gratitude for what God had provided, Israelites were then commanded to allow their own poor and immigrants who owned no land to glean from their fields. This was a holy practice as part of holy worship. In that same way, when we give generously to others from what we

have earned, we are worshipping God by acknowledging all that he has given to us and honoring God's care for all persons by reciprocating that care for those in need.

3. The Harvest gleaning was a way of remembering God's generosity.

Deuteronomy 24:19-22

¹⁹ When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings. ²⁰ When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. ²¹ When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. ²² *Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this.*

God never wanted the Israelites to forget that he had generously rescued them from slavery in Egypt, and that he had taken them from a place where they had absolutely nothing and given them a land to call their own. In that same way, God gave us Jesus who lifts us out of slavery to sin and death and gives us new and everlasting life. So when we act generously, we do this because God has first been generous with us.

Transition: When the Israelites allowed the poor, widows, and immigrants to glean from their harvest, they were being obedient to God's law, they were worshipping God, and they were remembering that God had been generous to them when they too had nothing. Using the harvest as an opportunity to give to others is a practice that was established by God, and we continue that today through our own harvest offering. Although we aren't following the practice of 'gleaning' in the

strictest sense, when we intentionally look over all that God has blessed us with over the last year and give a portion of that to those in need, we are acting in obedience to God's law, we are worshipping, and we are remembering all of the times that God has generously given to us.

C) The Harvest as a Metaphor for Generosity

In our Scripture for today, Paul uses the harvest as a metaphor for our generosity or lack thereof. There are several key ideas that can be drawn from his metaphor. He says very bluntly in v. 6 'the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.' There is a direct connection between our generosity towards others and God's generosity towards us, which is a pretty sobering thought. He also makes the point in v. 7 that our choice to be generous should be cheerfully chosen, not reluctant or forced. Giving out of obligation is not an act of worship. In v. 8 Paul tells us 'God

is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.’ God can provide everything that we need, so out of our ‘enoughness’ we are able to give generously. The question is, do we even know what ‘enough’ is? Can we let go of our drive to consume long enough to even recognize that God has given us enough? In v. 10 Paul tells us that God is our provider, and will multiply our opportunities to ‘sow’ with his seed and harvest even more righteousness. In vv. 11-12, Paul echoes the words in Deuteronomy, saying that these acts of generosity are also acts of Thanksgiving to God. And finally in vv. 14-15, obedient giving glorifies God.

So, as we consider giving our own Harvest offering today, we need to ask ourselves, are we giving generously in the same way that God has been generous to us, are we giving

cheerfully and not out of obligation, and do we trust that God provides us with more than enough so that we can bless others?

D) Our Harvest Giving: Haiti and Local (Dayton/Logan County)

This year our Harvest Offering is going to support the work that our local Mennonite Disaster Service chapter is doing to help with the work being done in Dayton to recover from the Memorial Day tornadoes. According to the support site Miami Valley Strong, the 21 tornadoes that struck Dayton that weekend devastated thousands of lives, homes, and businesses. Over 7,000 homes were damaged and of these, over 1,500 were destroyed. For the those impacted, their lives will not return to normal for months and years to come. These communities and the **thousands of individuals affected still need help.**

Along with the money that we will be giving to help assist in MDS's efforts in this area, Oak Grove is teaming up with Urbana United Methodist Church this summer for a joint mission trip between youth groups to Dayton to help with the recovery. We are extremely excited for this opportunity to work together for the good of our neighboring community, and there will be opportunities not only for the high schoolers, youth sponsors, and their parents to be involved, but for anyone in the church who might be interested in helping somehow in the project. Christopher Dinnell, the youth pastor at Urbana UMC, and I are in the process of planning the mission trip and more information will be coming out in the months ahead about how you can get involved.

The second place that our Harvest Offering is going to support this year is through Mennonite Central Committee's work in Haiti. Our very own Christy Kauffman is working

remotely from Nicaragua to write stories of the relief efforts being done through MCC in Haiti right now. One of these efforts that our money will go to support is a partnership with Konbit Peyizan. This program seeks to address malnutrition of children and has seen success, with 98% of acutely malnourished children able to recover in their communities without needing hospitalization. Without this program, many would end up hospitalized. Young children who are not treated have a 20 percent chance of death. For those who survive, life-long consequences can include poor brain development and intellectual disabilities, heart damage, metabolic disorders, autoimmune diseases and physical stunting. I'm going to read a story that Christy collected about how the work of MCC and Konbit Peyizan has positively affected the life of young mother 'Adline.'

“I had my first child when I was 17. I got pregnant because my family didn’t have the means to support me, and I didn’t have the chance to go to school. I was very miserable when I was pregnant with my child, I didn’t have the means to get medical care during my pregnancy or go to the hospital often. Since I didn’t have the money for medication or much medical care in the pregnancy, it made the delivery very difficult. When the doctor saw that I would not be able to have a normal delivery, he did a C-section so they could deliver the baby. When I left the hospital the baby got sick right away because I couldn’t find good care for my baby or myself.

The child’s father couldn’t help me because he had nothing, he didn’t have a job. The thing that makes me saddest in this story is that my child never stopped being sick. I looked everywhere; I couldn’t find a remedy. When my child was 6 months old, I got a boyfriend

because I thought he could help me take care of my baby. I believed that this was the best decision I could make at the time because I didn't have any help at all. But it wasn't true, my child didn't recover, and this man asked me to have another child for him. I felt really sick when he said that to me. I didn't want to, but at the same time, I didn't have a choice because he was my only rescue. One of the reasons that he wanted me to have a child for him was because he thought my first child would die.

I was still fighting every day to see if I could keep my child alive even as my child had diarrhea every day without stop. When he was 14 months old, I got pregnant again and the problems only increased. When the child was 17 months old, I met with nurses who were visiting our area. The nurses wanted to examine children in the area who were sick. This is how they realized that my son was very ill. They started to talk to me, they gave me a lot of

good advice, a lot of medications. When I started giving him the medications, he became worse at first, but I continued to give them to him. I applied all their suggestions and advice and in a few days, I saw him start to improve. Now my child is 24 months, and I just had another baby.

I am very happy with the way the nurses worked with me. If Konbit Peyizan didn't send them to do this work, my child would have died. I am very happy and have hope that my second baby will be healthier than my first. When I had my first baby, I didn't have any education or know anything about how to take care of children, but now I know a lot. Thank you so much Konbit Peyizan, I pray that God will continue to bless you."

Following the response song, we collect our Harvest offering to support the work of MDS and MCC. May this be a joyful time of

worshipping God through generous giving as we thank God for all that He has given to us.