

The first person to be served at today's potluck following the annual meeting isn't here.

The first person to go through the line will not be holding a plate but rather a plastic container that will be sealed and sent to one of our shut-in members, *a portion* of our potluck *to those for whom nothing is prepared*.

This portion will not be leftovers; this portion will be first fruits.

Not only will it serve its recipient, but it will serve us as a visual reminder that this day, this meal, this community, all of it is God's, not ours; that we are stewards, not owners.

That is why we as God's people practice and teach first fruits giving: the first fruits, the best apples off the tree, the best cut of casserole, the choicest piece of fried chicken, the top ten percent of the paycheck, the first and finest slice of what we have is returned to God in thanksgiving and with confidence that there will still be enough for us.

This wise, ancient practice stretches back even before the recession, before the Great Depression, back into the book of the law that was a dusty, distant memory even when Ezra read it at the Water Gate twenty-five hundred years ago.

Perhaps it was the word *tithing* that made the people weep.

The best ten percent feels like way too much at first blush, especially in Illinois, a state in financial crisis with fierce political will to keep income tax at no more than three.

It takes time and practice to find the surprising joy in first fruits giving, the delight that comes with it, the feeling of liberation and sweet release in the discovery that God provides enough, even if it isn't when and how we expect.

Usually the abundance comes from the faithful community, perhaps in tupperware when we are too ill to join in person, often in the form of potluck--you contribute your best dish, you get what you don't plan for, and somehow by the grace of God there is plenty.

It takes time and practice to trust this...like learning how to swim, it only happens when you jump into the water, supported there by someone who loves you, and realize that not only can you stay afloat, you can move with a freedom you never imagined from dry ground.

We jump into the water together, holding hands, holding each other: we give our first ten percent of the church budget to God through the mission and ministries of our wider church, and we give the first cut of potluck to our wider congregation as a thankful, joyful offering to God.

It's a good start...but Jesus pushes us further.

Are we really giving it away?

Are we really releasing that first portion of potluck?

Nehemiah and Ezra would be delighted to learn that the first fruits of today's lunch will be given to voting members in good standing.

They will not be shared with non-members, foreigners, families tainted by intermarriage, non-believers, or anyone denied a vote at the annual meeting by our constitution.

Ezra and Nehemiah worked hard to rebuild Jerusalem and its walls, not only to keep people safe inside, but to keep others outside.

They forbade intermarriage, instructed those with foreign spouses and mixed families to abandon their children, and worked tirelessly to preserve an ethnic, religious and racial purity among God's chosen people that was tight and exclusive.

They represent one side of a great biblical debate.

The other side is represented by the third of three prophets writing under the name Isaiah. Roughly contemporary of Ezra and Nehemiah, Third Isaiah imagines God's temple to be a house of prayer for all nations, welcoming those previously forbidden by purity laws, any and all who would keep God's sabbath and work God's generous justice in the world.

The people of God were called to be a light to the nations rather than a sealed plastic container preserving exclusive blessings.

What Ezra and Nehemiah sought to trap and protect, Third Isaiah strove to unleash and release.

When Jesus is in the synagogue, with both choices before him, he sides with Third Isaiah.

Using the soaring poetry of the prophet, Jesus announces his ministry agenda, which can be summarized in one word: *release*.

The poor will be released from the perpetual cycle of bad news.

The blind will be released from the prison of perpetual darkness, the captives released from their unbending shackles, the oppressed released from the man keeping them down.

The year of the Lord's favor, the year of Jubilee, was a practice of radical release from the same wise, ancient law that instructed first fruits giving.

The idea was that every fifty years the people and the economy would be given a fresh start through a wholesale strategy of release: the land would be granted complete rest, all debts would be cancelled, all slaves set free, and all ancestral lands sold or lost due to financial hardship returned to their original owners.

All the people and the land itself would be released from inequities, misfortunes, abuses and mistakes.

The idea was so radical and far-reaching that it probably never actually happened.

The plantation owners and the pharmaceutical companies would never allow it.

Jesus, however, dares to proclaim it as the capstone of his agenda of release, and his hometown hoots and hollers with approval...until ten minutes later, when they try to kill him.

But that's next week's story.

Suffice it for now to say that Jesus enraged them by releasing himself from their hopes and presumptions that he was there to do their bidding.

He was there, instead, to do God's bidding, the same God who bypassed several Jewish lepers to heal a Gentile and bypassed several starving Jewish widows to feed a foreign widow and her son.

The tupperware was sent to non-members.

The best chicken went to a non-believer who gave no offering last year and has never attended worship.

The grace of God was released beyond the carefully constructed borders of the community.

We have heard in the vision process that our congregation does too much for non-members but fails to care for its own.

We have also heard that we are too inwardly focused, caring for our own but not reaching out to others enough.

God was kind enough to include both Nehemiah and Isaiah among our voices.

Since a well negotiated compromise is one neither side is happy with, hopefully we are at least close to getting it right, as God has beloved children on both sides of the walls.

And all of us, on whatever side of whatever wall we find ourselves to be, are captive.

All of us yearn for release from something.

The executive with the big income and job security and fancy house is so beholden to her company and her lifestyle that she cannot break away, whether to speak the unfiltered truth in a meeting or to take a full two weeks of restful inactivity.

Those without work are captive to their daily worries about survival in a cruel and unforgiving system.

But it is more than economic: the word release is the same word that means *forgive*.

Some of us are trapped by guilt and shame and ache for forgiveness.

Some of us are trapped by grudges, whether we or someone else is the one holding onto them, the one refusing release.

Some of us are trapped in fear, trapped in addiction, trapped in abusive relationships, trapped in vanity and pride, trapped in unrealistic expectations, trapped in dysfunctional family systems, trapped in the pigeonhole of a restricting reputation.

Some of us are trapped in illness and physical limitation.

Some of us are trapped in spiritual bondage to a childish idea of a petty, judgmental God.

And many of us are still trapped economically: trapped in debt, trapped in lifestyle, trapped in service to a smiling benefactor whose strings always remain attached, trapped in poverty --too poor to buy a washing machine, so the wash has to be done at an overpriced laundromat with time lost waiting for the clothes to be done--too poor to afford the grocery store, so more time is lost because the food has to come from the crowded pantry which has only one checkout line.

In one version of the confession, we say, *we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves*.

I was first trained to think of sin as my own catalog of bad habits and self-centered behaviors, and while that is surely true and extensive enough, I also needed to be released from such a myopic view of sin, which is shorthand for the whole tangle of human brokenness that ties us all up and from which we all need one form or another of release.

So how does this sweet release happen?

Partly, it happens by the grace of God--in God's way, in God's time, on God's terms, over which we have no control.

Perhaps it is the illusion of control, and the addiction to power, from which we most need release.

Partly, too, it happens by practicing what we pray for, by doing unto others what we most want done unto us.

We get by giving.

We are released by releasing; *forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us*.

By learning to let go, we begin to be liberated from whatever won't let go of us.

*Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose*, sang Janis Joplin.

What do we need to lose?

What do we need to stop holding onto--what stuff, what security blankets, what grudges, what attitudes, what assumptions, what expectations of God and others and self?

What do we need to let go of, to release in order to be following the ministry agenda of Jesus, the counter-intuitive path to the unrestrained joy of the Lord which is our strength?

The first slice of lunch is a start.

Modestly but truly, today this Scripture will be fulfilled in our hearing.