

Full stomach, faulty memory

A sermon on Deuteronomy 8:6–18; 15:1–11

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We are daily awash in choices and opportunities, and many of us are affluent enough to be able to choose among many options. Many of us make many choices even before we get out the door in the morning. Our stomachs are full, we have built fine houses and live in them, our income and assets have grown, our retirement funds are increasing, and our possessions keep multiplying.

As the people of Israel stand on the verge of possibilities in the land they are about to be brought into, Moses begins to say:

“When your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied . . .” (Deut.

The promise is vast: “You will lack nothing.” But in the next breath we read: “Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God.” Why the caution?

The people are leaving the wilderness behind. What could go wrong?

8:13; NRSV). Apparently the people can expect that everything they have will multiply, multiply, multiply. Repetition is a literary device biblical writers used when they wanted to call the reader’s attention to something important. Why might it be important for God’s people then—and now—to pay attention to the words of this text?

What is at stake?

Like the people first addressed in this text, our very identity as people of God and our loyalty to God’s way are at stake. The

speeches of Moses collected in the book of Deuteronomy are a testimony to God’s generous, faithful activity toward the people of Israel, even in the face of their failures. Their identity depends on their remembering God’s activities in their behalf; they are to cultivate a memory capable of inspiring loyalty to God’s ways.

The speech in chapter eight anticipates the end of Israel’s long sojourn in the wilderness. It describes the bounty of the good land they are about to enter: it is a land flowing with streams, with

springs and underground waters. (Remember, they've just been wandering in the desert!) It is a land that will produce wheat, barley, fig trees, vines, pomegranates, olive trees, and honey, and there will be no lack of bread. And what is more, the land has abundant resources of iron and copper—assets able to produce incredible wealth. The promise is vast: “You will lack nothing” (v. 9).

But in the next breath we read: “Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God, by failing to keep his commandments . . . which I am commanding you today” (v. 11). Why the caution? The people are finally going to leave behind a journey of hardship in the wilderness where they have been tested for forty years. What could go *wrong*?

God helps those . . .

What *could* go wrong? When the people of Israel are settled comfortably in this good land, they could forget that they are a people who rely on God to protect them and provide for them. This warning is meant to jolt them out of dozing off, their stomachs full from feasting on the bounty of the land (think the tryptophan effect that sets in after a Thanksgiving feast). When “all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God” (v. 13–14).

North America is full of stories of individual perseverance and success. Many of us can bring to mind stories in our own family histories of achievement in the face of hardship. Hard work and success may even be our own experience. Many of us have made it in this land of plenty.

Be mindful when you've made it, this Deuteronomy text urges. When you've settled comfortably, when you are well fed and successful, beware! Your success and the multiplying of your assets may lead you to feel self-satisfied and entitled. Is this the reason so many people believe the popular saying “God helps those who help themselves” is in the Bible?

A gift kept long enough seems like a possession

The problem reflected in Moses's warning to the people of Israel is *not* that God is no longer trustworthy. Rather, because comfort could replace the people's awareness of their complete depen-

dence on God, Moses knows that their identity could shift. They could begin to trust in themselves and say: “My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth” (v. 17).

Now wealth is not condemned in this text. In fact, the promise is that assets will accumulate and multiply in the good land. Moses’s words do not condemn hard work or criticize dedication to one’s career or censure the kind of perseverance amid hardship that yields success.

What Moses identifies is the danger that attachment to what makes us comfortable can compromise our true identity. When our stomachs are full, our temptation is to look around at everything we have accumulated and simply be satisfied with ourselves. We can forget that everything is a gift. When we’ve eaten our fill, we can forget to bless the Lord.

Walter Brueggemann in his commentary on Deuteronomy writes that Moses wanted to remind people that God would give them what they needed, whatever land they were in. They were to be on guard, because “a gift kept long enough begins to seem like a possession . . . separated in the memory of the recipient from the giver, so that the giver is forgotten.”¹

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Mark Allan Powell in his book *Giving to God* uses the metaphor of house-sitting to explore this tendency. People who house-sit have access to all the amenities of the abode; for a time they can pretend that it’s their place. Now, what if these house-sitters decided to change the locks and claim the

house as their own? Suppose when the owners confronted the house-sitters, the sitters’ claim would be, “Hey, the house is mine—you *gave* it to me!”²

As wealth increases, sensitivity decreases

When we forget that everything is a gift, we can begin to believe that whatever we’ve gathered is ours: we earned it, deserve it, and we can do with it whatever we please. In several recent social class experiments, researchers have shown that increased wealth is associated with decreased sensitivity to others in one’s social

environment. Paul Piff, postdoctoral scholar in the psychology department of the University of California, Berkeley, conducted several experiments documenting that as wealth increases, people

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are more likely to see themselves as deserving good things in life and entitled to better outcomes; they feel that they have directly contributed to or been directly responsible for the increase, even when they have inherited their wealth. At the same time, they are less likely to show compassion for others.³

Moses suggests that to resist the amnesia that seems to accompany a full stomach, which leads to becoming complacent and self-satisfied, God's people are to reaffirm their identity and "keep the commandments of the LORD your God, by walking in his ways and fearing him" (v. 6), and by being careful not to "forget the LORD your God, by failing to keep his commandments" (v. 11).

An every-seventh-year reminder

Deuteronomy 15 lays out a gracious commandment given to the people of Israel as a way to draw them away from claiming the gifts of God as theirs to possess. In the seventh year people are to cancel debts in the community.

Moses questioned whether this remission of debts would be necessary, given the promise that "there will, however, be no one in need among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession to occupy, if only you will obey the Lord your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today" (v. 4-5). We know that it didn't work out that way.

Cancellation of debt may not sound all that gracious to those of us who live in societies that depend on debt to spur economic growth and increase prosperity. For Moses's audience, on the other hand, debt was often a sign of desperate need. It could be the result of crop failure, accident, illness, or death. Because our wealth tends to lure us into believing that we are owners of what God has entrusted to us, Moses continues: "If there is among you anyone in need, . . . do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward

your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be” (v. 7–8).

Even when the seventh year is just around the corner and all debts will soon be cancelled, the hands of those able to give are to remain open in sharing. Because the identity of the people of God is formed by the story of God’s grace freeing them from slavery, caring for them in the wilderness, and settling them in a land of abundance, they are to be generous. By opening their hands to the needy they are to remember that everything entrusted to them is a gift. If the data gathered from social class experiments cited above is reliable, a context of affluence is likely to be one in which people become hard-hearted and tight-fisted rather than open-handed.

Keep the gift circulating

Ched Myers of Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries suggests that for us to resist the temptation to cling to what we have been given, the gift must always move. The natural abundance of creation lasts only as long as the gift circulates.⁴

Paul encouraged Timothy to exhort his congregation to practice circulating their gifts. We can hear echoes of Deuteronomy 8 and 15 in his pastoral letter to Timothy: “As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share” (1 Tim. 6:17–18).

Like Moses, Paul’s antidote to the failure of memory that comes with a full stomach is generous living. Rather than dozing in a state of self-satisfaction, we can wake up, choose to take hold of life that really is life, and be generous with the gifts that we have been given. We can put our money where our mouth is when we say we love Jesus. In bumper sticker wisdom: “Tithe if you love Jesus! Anyone can honk.”

Living with comfortable guilt

Still, we find many reasons to resist living with open hands. The authors of *Passing the Plate: Why American Christians Don’t Give Away More Money* studied giving patterns and surveyed Christian

givers. They write that many American Christians experience “a kind of ‘comfortable guilt’—that is, living with an awareness and feeling of culpability for not giving money more generously, but maintaining that at a low enough level of discomfort that it was not too disturbing or motivating enough to actually increase giving. . . . Many Christians did not have clean consciences about money. But neither did they seem prepared to change their financial dealings in ways that would eliminate their modest levels of guilt.”⁵ According to this survey, the gift doesn’t circulate as easily when what we have has multiplied. When we have received more, we are inclined to clutch it more tightly.

But before we conclude that Christians just need to give more, we must address the deeper question of what stories shape our

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identity and loyalty. We may need to ask whether we are able in our affluence to be jolted out of amnesia by what Brueggemann calls an “astonishing memory of generous sustenance”—a surprising memory that God has been generous to us. What stories can we tell and retell that will capture our imaginations and inspire us to live generously—to keep God’s gift to us moving?

Living out of astonishing memories of generous sustenance

On a frosty September morning, in the middle of his shift a Winnipeg bus driver stopped his bus on Portage Avenue at Main Street. He proceeded to jump out and give his shoes to a man he had noticed walking barefoot that day and the day before. He

drove the rest of his shift in stocking feet. To his surprise the story went viral, picked up by media all over the world. Later that week, in an interview with a Winnipeg journalist, he recalled, “I couldn’t imagine him walking a mile without shoes. I couldn’t imagine how cold he was.” So when a light turned red and the opportunity presented itself, he acted.

Let’s share such stories of empathic imagination with one another, to stir ourselves out of the dozing that can overtake

when our assets multiply. Let's add these stories to the fund of narratives that shape our identity as people called to be open-handed by a God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Let's not wait for our low level of discomfort to increase as we observe the needs of others around us. Instead, let's choose to declare our primary loyalty to a God who gives generously and asks us to keep the gifts circulating.

Moses's words in Deuteronomy invite us today to let ourselves be shaken out of the stupor that can accompany affluence. Our compassionate imagination can be stirred when we remember and repeat stories that remind us that all we are and all we have comes from the hands of a generous God who invites us to be open-handed too. We can discover the joy of grateful living as we keep God's gifts circulating. Thanks be to God.

Notes

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 109.

² Mark Allan Powell, *Giving to God: The Bible's Good News about Generous Living* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

³ "Are the Rich Less Feeling? Research Suggests Wealth Reduces Compassion," CBC/Radio-Canada *The Current* interview with Paul Piff, October 16, 2013; link online to listen: <http://www.cbc.ca/thecurrent/episode/2013/10/16/are-the-rich-less-feeling-research-suggests-wealth-reduces-compassion/>.

⁴ "The Gift Must Always Move: An Interview with Ched Myers on Sabbath Economics," *Inward/Outward*, January 2002, 1–5; online link at <http://www.chedmyers.org/articles/sabbath-economics/gift-must-always-move-interview-ched-myers-sabbath-economics>. Myers is drawing on ideas articulated by Lewis Hyde in *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World* (New York: Random House, 1983).

⁵ Christian Smith, Michael O. Emerson, and Patricia Snell, *Passing the Plate: Why American Christians Don't Give Away More Money* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

About the author

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