Sunday School Commentary Lesson

By

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Feast of Weeks, Leviticus 23: 15-22

In Israel, holiness was not confined to people and objects but also extended to times and seasons. Life was not an unbroken highway leading endlessly to more of the same. Here and there along the way there were oases of refreshment, celebration, and commemoration - sabbaths, festivals, and special days of awe and praise. The special times of holiness aimed to disclose what was true of all time, that it belongs to God. The purpose of sabbath, for example, was not to be the one and only holy day in the week. Instead, the sabbath brought to visibility the holiness of all days. A sabbath or a festival was like a kiss between lovers. It gathered into a special moment what was always true. Just so, a Tuesday was as holy as a sabbath, but it took the "kiss" of the sabbath to make that clear.

Commentary Lesson

The Feast of Weeks (so called because it is celebrated after a week of weeks, or seven weeks after Firstfruits) is called the Feast of Harvest in Exodus 23:16 and the "Firstfruits of the wheat harvest" in Exodus 34:22. Since it follows Passover by fifty days, it came to be known as "Pentecost" or "fiftieth," from the Greek. It is a one-day celebration of rejoicing over the abundant gifts of food that God has given in the harvest. The Feast of Firstfruits marks the beginning of the harvest with the presentation of the sheaf of barley to the Lord (v.10), but now the feast of Pentecost, or Weeks, celebrates the completion of the wheat harvest, which generally lasted from the end of April well into the month of June, depending on the location in Israel, the soil, and the slowness of the season. The Firstfruits of barley come from the field, but the "offering of new grain (of wheat)" (v.16) comes as prepared food. Both the Firstfruits and the new grain offerings, however are unlike the grain offerings described in Leviticus 2, for both represent the ordinary food of the people.

What good does it do to bring our offering and worship God? William Willimon writes in his book, Why I Am A United Methodist - "Does Sunday worship put food in hungry mouths, establish a more just society, cure illnesses, or soothe pain? Well, yes in a way. But mostly Sunday prayer and praise brings us together with God. Sometimes, in our worship, we are motivated to change our life-style. Sometimes, after a sermon, we are filled with motivation to go out into the world and do justice. Often, through the music, we do feel a sense of great peace and reassurance. But mostly what we get is God. All of this worthwhile service in our world is but a by-product of the main event of the service of God. We are here on Sunday because we are in love with God. Like all lovers, we overflow with a desire to return some of the love and affection which God has turned toward us."
In the New Testament "Firstfruits" came to symbolize for early Jewish Christians that Christ "our Passover" would be raised from the dead and be the promise of the resurrection of all others who hoped to be raised from the grave. It is little wonder, then, that the apostle Paul seized on this crucial point of "Firstfruits" in the Feast of Weeks in 1Corinthians 15:20 and declared the resurrection of Christ on Easter Day to be "the Firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." When Christ rose from the dead on the first day after the sabbath, he became the Firstfruits of the harvest of all those who had died in faith and were awaiting the resurrection of their bodies from the dead. The New Testament writers frequently employed the figure of Firstfruits for example, Romans 8:23; 11:16; 16:5; James 1:18; Revelation 14:4.

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