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Sermon Transcript: Pentecost and First Fruits

I did not have the privilege or honor to serve in the military, but I did work alongside the military for most of my career before I became a pastor. My first job out of college was working for General Dynamics on US Army SINCGARS radios, building those and designing the new modes for those. And then I went on to work for a software company in DC, and eventually that role evolved into my primary job which was being in charge of this software project called NetWars, which the J6 office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the Pentagon used to plan communication networks. Whenever they'd bring the Army and the Navy and Air Force, all the different branches together for a joint operation, they would want to plan out the communication network and they would use this software to do it. And that meant that a lot of the time I got to go to the Pentagon for meetings.

Was it cool? Yes, it was cool. I'll admit it. I just thought—I mean, I didn't have a badge where I could walk in, but I feel like I had an even better deal because every time I went over to the Pentagon, Major Flournoy would have to go from the J6 office, walk down. And so I would just be standing and all of a sudden, you know, this guy in uniform walks up and he goes, "Yeah, that guy there. Come on, here we go." And then I would get an escort back to the offices from the security desk there. And it was just—it was very rewarding work.

The colonel in charge of it, Colonel Dawson, was a fun guy. I just thought he was kind of a goofball though, to be honest. Which is ridiculous because he's a colonel working in the J6 office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He's not a goofball, Rob, but he just had that kind of personality. Like, we went to this very formal presentation one time and we were sitting next to one another. All the military were in their dress uniform, and so the Navy were in their dress whites. Do we have any former Navy? Yeah. So, those dress whites—evidently, it was a joke for the army guys, because Colonel Dawson was Army, to talk about how it kind of looks like they're selling ice cream in those white outfits. And he would say to me, he'd go, "Hey Rob, go up and ask the Navy guy if they have chocolate and strawberry too. They'll love it. It's hilarious." I can tell you, they did not appreciate the joke. Colonel Dawson would do things like that.

He had little phrases he'd like to say as well. He'd say to me things like, "Yeah, this is great, Rob, but I don't know what I want, but I'll know it when I see it. So, just keep bringing me things," as we brought different versions of the software to him. And then there was another time where he'd say, "Yeah, this problem is like a bad piece of meat. It just gets worse the longer you chew on it." And I just thought, "This guy is just—how did he get here? He's just this goofy kind of character."

The Airborne Colonel's Fear

Then we had dinner together this one time, and that's when he shared all sorts of things. First of all, I learned that Colonel Dawson had a PhD in statistics. What? Furthermore, before that, he served with the US Army Airborne. Like, those are the guys who literally jump out of airplanes into the front lines of a conflict. It was during that meal together that he said these words to me. He said, "I remember the last time I jumped out of an airplane and I knew I could just never do it again." And I said, "Well, what was it?" And it kind of went on a little bit. He said, "Well, I loved being in Airborne and I love that calling and I love serving that way, but then my son Brian was born. And I remember the first time I jumped out of one of those airplanes after he was born, because that was also the last time I jumped out of an airplane. I just couldn't do it anymore." He's like, "I was afraid. I was afraid that something might happen to me."

There are wonderful people who serve in our armed forces who constantly put their lives on the line in very dangerous situations and still have families, but for Colonel Dawson, he just could not do that. It was just too much for him. And so he had to find another way to use the gifts and abilities God had given to him. And it turns out God gave him a pretty brilliant brain because he went back and got a PhD in statistics and then became the head of the J6 command there, which planned communications across the military.

The Festival of Weeks: Overcoming Fear

Fear is a powerful motivator. Fear is a powerful factor in the way we make decisions. And honestly, this holiday of Pentecost, or as it was also called, the Festival of Weeks, I believe was a ritual that God gave to the people to help them address their own fears, their own worries. Because what this was, this was a festival where—and it's detailed back here in Deuteronomy—these people who were growing food were supposed to take the very first crop of what they gathered and give it as an offering to God.

Do you realize the amount of fear you have to overcome? You don't know if it's going to be a good crop that year. You don't know what the rest of the harvest is going to be. So the idea that you give the very first that you collect as an offering to God, it's a ritual given to the people so that they could overcome that fear and trust that God would provide, and trust that if it isn't a good harvest, that yet still God will provide. And so this ritual is given to the people to show that trust, to show the hope that they had in that ongoing relationship with God. And so they would bring the very first of what they had, risking it for the sake of that sacrifice, for the sake of that offering, to make it clear where their gratitude was, to make it clear who they trusted.

This celebration was to happen 50 days after the celebration of Passover. Passover is the celebration of when they're set free, and 50 days later to celebrate that freedom by trusting the first harvest and making that an offering. That's why we call it Pentecost. 50 days. In the Christian church, we celebrate it 50 days after when we believe we were set free—50 days

after Easter. And some of you are already doing the math and saying, "It's not 50 days after Easter, Pastor Rob." Well, the problem is we didn't think we could get you here on a Thursday, so we just celebrate Pentecost the closest Sunday to that 50-day mark. But it is our celebration.

If you look at these two ways of celebrating it, they speak to some very similar ideas. In the original Pentecost, the whole idea was to remember, as you're giving this offering, that we were a wandering people without a land, and we came into an area given to us by God. And when we give this offering, we give it of the first fruits, as I said before. And the Levite and the foreigner or immigrant that's with us, they too get to join in the celebration. And the reason for that is because the Levite, being part of the priestly clan, did not get to own land, so they could not produce a harvest. And the foreigner or immigrant amongst us does not have that ability as well because they've just come in and joined with us, so they may not have the ability to produce something. So it's important in this celebration that when we gather together and we celebrate, we make sure that everybody can celebrate. We make space for everyone in this celebration of giving thanks to God and trusting God.

From Leftovers to First Fruits

In the story of Pentecost that we celebrate that comes from the second chapter of Acts, that's when you had a whole bunch of disciples of Jesus who were afraid. There was fear. What happens now? Now that we are in a world after the cross? What happens in that story in Acts chapter 2 is they gather together and the Holy Spirit comes and inspires them and they start sharing the good news about what Jesus has done. And the people who are gathered there—people of different nationalities, the foreigners all around—they're able to hear this good news because, through the miracle of the gift of the spirit, they actually hear the message in their native tongue. And that very gathering—the reason why they were all together that day—was because they were celebrating this Festival of Weeks. They were celebrating the Jewish Pentecost when they were together in that moment. And as they were gathered together, the first fruits were not an offering that was given, but the first fruits were those first fruits: the first 3,000 believers, the first 3,000 to join this ministry and mission to be followers of Jesus Christ and the good news that he gave. Those people become the first fruits now of the gift of the spirit to the people. And so we celebrate that to this day.

But what does it look like for you and I to give a first fruits kind of offering in our lives? Most of us are not farmers. We are not living in an agriculturally based society. What is it like for us? It means giving in a way that shows our full trust in God. It means giving in a way that perhaps leads in the spaces of uncertainty. But how do we give our offering? Not just the offering of the money that we give, but the offering of the time that we give and the use of our talents and our abilities.

Too often what happens in our lives is that, well, first we got to take it—we've got our

responsibilities here, we've got our work that we're doing, we've got these issues going on in our household, we've got this going on in our lives. And then with what's left over, we give. We give to the church. We give to the ministry. We give to the mission. We're so busy with the rest of our lives that too often God doesn't get our first fruits, but God gets our last fruits. And so our giving isn't a sign of our trust; it's a sign that we got a little bit left over and we feel comfortable enough that we can participate.

What that comes out of is a little bit of fear, if we're honest with ourselves. Not so much fear of persecution—I don't think many of us are afraid to fully go all-in on this ministry and mission because we're afraid of persecution. I think it's more often just the old FOMO: fear of missing out. "But I have other things I want to do with my life and other things I want to do with my time and, I don't know, is it going to be worth it?"

At some point in our lives of faith, the hope is that we move to a place of spiritual maturity. That what we say is: it is worth it. That this ministry and mission that's been given to us through Christ is worth our time—and not just our leftover time, but with the beginning of our motivations, the beginning of our energies, the first fruits of what we have to give. What would that look like? What would that look like if we rose every day concerned about going forth? Maybe that involves going to a job, or maybe that involves going to volunteer somewhere, or maybe that involves just tending to something or helping out a family member or a friend. But we go into each one of these beginning each day with the full intention that we're going to give that first energy, that first intention, that first bit of our willpower towards that ministry and mission we've been given—towards being agents of mercy and peace and grace and love in this world. What would that look like?

Courage in the Midst of Fear

I think that fear still runs around in our brains and in our hearts. "But what if I don't have enough? But what if I miss out on something? What is it going to be like though if I go and participate in that?" And so we hold back just a little bit. Now, we're not meant for all of the duties that are out there. When we talk about the fear of serving the Lord, some of you are thinking about the toddler room. "I cannot—do not call me there, Lord!" The thing is, not all of you were meant for the toddler room, but some of you were. And the thought is, "But I'm not meant to be a—you know, even being a greeter just makes me too nervous. I just—I can't, that's too much for me." That's okay. You weren't made for that. But there's something else that you were built and made for. There's a way for you to serve in the church, in the community, as a witness to the One that you ultimately serve—to where your loyalty goes, to where your devotion goes, to make that evident in all the aspects of your life.

Colonel Dawson just could not jump out of airplanes anymore because he felt a fear as he went out that door into the clouds—that last jump—that he had never felt before. And what I appreciated about that moment in talking with him is that he was willing to share that vulnerability and to admit that really it was that fear that made him have to change what he

did. And I think it's okay for you and I to admit that we're still going to live our lives with some fear, some worry, some money worries, some worries about where we spend our time and how we do our efforts, and we're not going to get past all of our fears. But here's the thing: Colonel Dawson was determined to continue to serve his country and he was determined to do it with whatever gifts and abilities God had given to him. He was blessed with other abilities and he leaned into them.

And I guess what I'm saying to you is that you're called into a life of courageous faith. It isn't going to have an absence of fear. You're called into a life where despite whatever fears or worries or hesitations or doubts that you live with, you still are determined to serve this beautiful and wonderful God who has loved you so well. Someone much smarter than me once said that courage is not the absence of fear; courage is what you do in the midst of fear.

Let's be courageous in trusting that God will provide. Let's be courageous in the offerings that we give—not just of money, but of our time and our talents. Let's think about how our lives can be more oriented towards that which I believe is actually worth it. Because I do not believe that when we look at our God, we go, "You are not worth my time today. You are not worth any of my money. You are not worth any of the gifts and abilities I have to use for your purposes." I cannot believe that is the mindset that we're to hold on to. Rather, we realize all that we have, all that we are, should stand ready to serve that which is truly worthy. And what can it look like if we can just, in the midst of our own fear, find the space and the time to let our faith have the priority it should? In that way, I believe we can be courageous no matter where we're called to serve.

Hallelujah. Amen.