

A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on August 15, 2021

RESPONDING TO THE WORD: OFFERING OURSELVES

With a freewill offering I will sacrifice to you, I will give thanks to your name, O Lord for it is good.

Psalm 54:6

Today we continue our summer series that focuses on the meaning and purpose of worship. We hope that our Covid experiences can help us make our liturgy have deeper meaning. Today we turn to an element of worship that we have not experienced for almost 19 months, the offering. All through the times of the most severe Covid restrictions, people would ask, "When will we be able to sing together?" or "When will we be able to move or stand?" Or "I wish there was a coffee hour." Not once did someone say, "I wish we could take up the offering."

The offering is an element of worship that can seem to have little spiritual content. It is the part of worship that is often the source of humor.

Wishing to develop his son's character, a father once gave him a dollar bill and a twenty-dollar bill as he was departing for church, and said, "Now, son, you put whichever one you want in the collection plate."

At the dinner table that night his father asked which bill he had given. The young fellow replied, "Well just before they sent around the plate the preacher said, 'The Lord loves a cheerful giver,' and I knew I could be a lot more cheerful if I gave the dollar, so I gave it."

One Sunday just before the sermon a minister said, "I have three messages prepared for today one lasts for forty-five minutes and costs \$1000, a second lasts thirty minutes and costs \$2000, a third last fifteen minutes and costs \$5000. We will now take up the offering to determine which sermon the congregation prefers."

I could go on for another half-hour telling jokes and stories about that part of the service we call the offering. Somewhere over the course of history the offering in worship seems to have been reduced to a process of collecting money. Almost all the spiritual content of this part of worship has been lost through the years.

During my years of ministry, I have increasingly had suggestions from people to get rid of the offering in worship entirely. Some have suggested that there are more efficient ways to collect the people's gifts to the church. Some propose encouraging people to mail in one check a month or quarter. Others encouraged us to enable people to have their pledges given directly to the church account by their bank. There are some congregations that now accept credit and debit cards. Some have said that those people who still deal in cash could place it in a plate on their way out of worship. The whole thrust of these comments is to allow people to give to the church without taking up time in worship. Some have suggested that our Covid experience has taught us the offering does not add anything to our experience of worship.

I dare say many, if not most, people conceive the offering merely as an outdated means of supporting the Church's budget.

So, what is the meaning and purpose of the response to the word that we call the offering?

If we look back at the history of worship the offering was not even primarily associated with collecting money. From early centuries in Christian history, the offering has been the occasion for presenting the bread and wine to be used in the Lord's Supper along with the gifts of the people. In our new *Book of Common Worship*, we find these words:

Christian life is an offering of one's self to God. In the Lord's Supper we are presented with the costly self-offering of Jesus Christ for the life of the world. As those who have been claimed and set free by his grace, we respond with gratitude, offering him our lives, our spiritual gifts, and our material goods.

I found out the hard way that Clarence Presbyterian is one of the few Presbyterian Churches that continue this tradition. The first time I celebrated the Lord's Supper at this Church was on World Communion Sunday in 2001. Everything was going along well for me until we began to sing the communion hymn. During the singing of the hymn it is my job to uncover the elements. When I looked down some of the elements were missing. There was no bread for me to break and the tankard that contained the grape juice was nowhere to be seen. I began to panic. The person who had prepared the table must have been distracted. What was I to do? Maybe I could break one of the little pieces of bread and pretend there was something in the chalice.

Then I looked up and there were two ushers carrying the bread and the tankard walking down the aisle towards me. I later learned this was the common practice here in Clarence. This practice is a faithful remnant of the offering. The people offer the fruits of their labor to God and he gives back to them in the sacrament.

If we are to restore the offering in our worship after all Covid restrictions are lifted, we need to reclaim its core meaning. The offering is a spiritual act in which we offer ourselves to God. To fully participate means first getting rid of a false understanding of the offering.

One great misunderstanding of the offering is as a means to buy off God. We see this at work in the Old Testament. Men and women came to the temple in Jerusalem to offer sacrifices to God. They would bring sheep, pigeons and other animals to be sacrificed. They believed that their sins were forgiven because of their offerings. In other cultures, offerings were made to God to insure a good harvest or victory in battle. These offerings amounted to bribes.

In Jesus, God presents us with a costly self-offering. It is Jesus' sacrifice that gives us forgiveness and wholeness. We cannot bribe God; God has already given us all that we need in Christ. Yet the Church has, through the years, corrupted this

message. The reformation in large measure was started because of the perversion of the true meaning of offering.

If you recall during the later Middle Ages the popes were intent on building the great complex known as St. Peter's in Rome. This vast and wondrous construction project required lots of cash. The authorities came up with an ingenious way to raise money through the sale of indulgences.

The understanding in those days was that God had given grace to the Church. When I say Church, I do not mean all the people of God. The Church was under control of and the property of the clergy. The Pope, Bishops and priests had the keys that could unlock the door to grace. If you wanted to receive God's forgiveness you had to go through a priest.

Indulgences were a way for people to access that grace for a price. Tetzl came into Germany preaching about Indulgences. In effect he had one of the most effective sales campaigns of all time. This was the deal. You could obtain – for a price – a piece of paper, which guaranteed forgiveness of your sins. What was even better was you could pay to gain an indulgence for a family member who had already died.

Can you imagine the power of this message? Tetzl could say your mother or father may even now be suffering in purgatory. Do you want to save them from their punishment? Step forward and for this amount of money you can receive this document that assures you that your loved one is in paradise? Tetzl had one of the great merchandizing phrases of all time – When the coin hits the bottom of the coffer another soul flies to heaven!

This was a total corruption of the Gospel of Jesus. This is what caused Martin Luther to step forward and challenge the church authorities. He protested this abuse of grace. He reminded the world that we can do nothing to merit God's love. Luther preached that it is grace alone that saves us. We do not bribe God into loving us; he freely gives us his love in Jesus.

The offering is therefore not a time we seek to buy off God,
the motive is not guilt
or obligation
or shame.

The motivation behind the offering is gratitude. One of the founders of the Presbyterian Church was John Calvin. He is usually presented as being a very dour, unsmiling, unbending personality. Yet in his great work ***The Institutes of the Christian Religion***, Calvin tells us that the Christian life is based on gratitude. He believed that all of our life should flow from a spirit of thanksgiving for what God has given us in Jesus.

We do not struggle to grow in faith in order to seek to win God's favor.
We do not learn to pray in order to please God.
We do not work in mission to help the poor in order to gain points with God.

God could not love us more than he does. He loves us so much that even before you or I were born he sent Jesus to live and die for us. There is nothing we can do to increase his concern for us.

But we can be grateful for all that God has done for us in creation and redemption. We give our time, talents and money because God has first loved us. Thanksgiving is the motivation of our offering.

Our offering is intended to be the giving of our whole being. Again, in our new *Book of Common Worship* under the section concerning the Offering we read these words:

Every service of worship shall include an opportunity to respond to Christ's call to discipleship through self-offering. The gifts we offer express our stewardship of creation, demonstrate our care for one another, support for the ministries of the church, and provide for the needs of the poor.

In these words, we are reminded that in the offering the money that we give is a symbol. The money represents our whole lives. The offering is an act of re-commitment to God.

Remember where the offering comes in our service. It comes after we have confessed our sins, after the reading of Scripture, after the proclamation of the Good News of God's love for us. The offering is our response to what God has already done for us. We claim these promises.

On communion Sundays the bread and wine are brought forward and blessed and then they come back to us as a means of grace. So, in the offering we give ourselves to God seeking that his love and grace will shape our lives.

The church I served in Niagara Falls had a frequent visitor. She was the mother of one of the members. She herself was a member of the Church of God. She was quite elderly and from time to time would be in the hospital and I would visit her. Almost every time I visited her she would say, **"I really like your sermons, but it is not a complete service."** She had said this several times before I had the courage to ask, "What do you mean it is not a complete service. She responded that **"it is not a real service without an altar call."**

She believed that at every worship service the people should be given an opportunity to come forward to commit themselves to Christ. While Presbyterians do not usually have altar calls, we do have a time in worship where those present are given the chance to respond to the word and recommit themselves to God. We call it the offering.

When we return to our normal worship patterns we must find ways to give people an opportunity to offer their whole beings to God remembering the words of the hymn – **Take my life and let it be, Consecrated Lord to Thee, Take my moments and my days; Let them flow in ceaseless praise.**