

WESTWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH/NOVEMBER 8, 2009

THE OFFERING/ACTS 4:32-37

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I. THE TEXT:

We are taking several weeks to consider our identity as stewards, as caretakers of God's world. In the early chapters of Genesis we learn that the first and still-in-place job description God gave to humanity was steward – and our call was to tend God's planet earth well. This morning we consider our stewarding identity by examining the way the early church lived out their economic stewardship. In today's scripture, Luke paints a picture of the life of the earliest Christian community. It is an idyllic picture of the early days when things [in spite of occasional persecution] were going right – there was harmony, members watched out for each other like brothers and sisters, there was a peace and joy that warmed the soul and was so compelling that people on the outside were signing up for their new members classes every single day.

Hear the word of God...

³²Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. ³³With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. ³⁵They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. ³⁶There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"). ³⁷He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

II. PRAYER: Precious Lord, be in the words spoken and in the words heard. May they be for us reminders not only of your love and grace, but also of your expectation that we live out your intentions for goodness and truth. Encourage us this day in hope and commitment. Amen.

III. INTRUSION

It happens every Sunday. We gather here to worship. We confess our sin and receive God's acceptance, we sing hymns of thanks and praise. Our choir blesses us with the beauty of music that reflects the glory of God. We read the Scriptures and listen as best we can for God's word through the words of the preacher. The sermon ends and then the oddest thing happens – we are asked for money. Small round plates are passed from pew to pew to pew... the choir sings something lovely... we pull out our wallets or purses and search for cash or a checkbook; or we give that slight shake of the head "no" when the usher offers us the plate – it's offering time.

True, some may welcome the offering... it means the preacher has finally stopped talking and the benediction is just around the corner. Some may be glad for another opportunity to give. And for some it is just the church asking for money again. But this morning, I'd like us to think together about the 5 minutes we spend every Sunday morning writing checks and pulling bills from our wallets before the offering plate makes its way to our pew... how do we understand this thing we call "the offering."

IV. THE ANCIENT TEXT

Several weeks ago we considered one of the earliest descriptions of Christian worship from Acts 2 – a description that followed closely on the heels of the Spirit of God’s arrival on that wild Pentecost morning. Luke writes of the early days, “*they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*” All of the elements that we continue to practice today have their roots in these practices of the first church. They encountered the Scriptures in the *apostles’ teaching*. They practiced the essence of Christian worship in *koinonia*, their fellowship with each other and with God. They gathered for prayer and sacraments in their “*breaking of bread and the prayers.*” It’s all right there – worship 101. Their Sunday morning practices looked a lot like ours – only without air conditioning or electric light bulbs.

But, the description of their life together doesn’t end there. Luke continues in chapter two with a glimpse into their stewardship season, “*All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.*” (44-45) Two chapters later in this morning’s text from Acts 4, we read this about “offering time” in the earliest church’s worship, “*There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostle’s feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.*” As Church Historian Cyril Richardson describes in his book *The Church Throughout the Centuries*, “At the Eucharist [Christians] gave freely of their substance (in kind as well as in money) for the aid of the shipwrecked sailors, orphans, widows, captives, and unemployed. All Christians in need were cared for and nourished from this liberal treasury. Their corporate devotion and their practical life of love were knit together in real unity.”

For the first Christians, there was simply no side-stepping the claims of love on every aspect of their lives. In his book *Call to Conversion*, modern prophet Jim Wallis concludes, “Despite all the attempts to rationalize the meaning of the verses quoted here, what they mean is not that complicated: they are simply descriptions of what happened when the Holy Spirit invaded the lives of the early Christians. The coming of the Spirit among them shattered the old and normal economic assumptions and created an entirely different economic order. The Spirit established a new way of thinking and a new way of living that affected their relationship to money and goods... The sharing recorded in Acts 2 and 4 was the attempt by the early Christians to make practical their understanding of the mind of Christ on economic matters...” Wallis continues, “The early Christians did not share their resources out of obligation, guilt, or in obedience to a new rule called ‘equality.’ They shared their goods out of a tremendous experience of joy and spontaneous offering. They had experienced the Holy Spirit in their midst, and their response was to share everything they had. [Apparently] behaving differently about money is a visible consequence of the Spirit’s presence.”²¹

One area where both liberal and evangelical scholar seem to agree is that in the early church, worship and faith had economic implications. Membership in the earliest Christian community meant taking on a new set of priorities when it came to setting the family budget... as did Jesus, they began to see the poor differently, as God’s children, as their personal responsibility. They came to understand the mission of the church, not as someone

else's job, but as their own personal, privileged duty. Their love for each other went beyond warm feelings, their love took on tangible dimensions – there were no needy among them.

Fast forward nearly 2 millennia... it seems in our world we have a firmly held belief that our spiritual life and our economic life have nothing to do with one another. Congregations and their pastors are generally quite squeamish when it comes to talk of money. How often we pastors hear adamant declarations such as, "Churches talk about nothing but money, money, money when they should be more concerned with spiritual matters." Or, "What a person gives or doesn't give is their own personal business." But this splitting up of life does not come from God's heart. Notice that where we would divorce economics from the spiritual, in the early church all of life was spiritual. Their money and what they did with it – just as much as their marriages and their worship services and their business ethics – were spiritual matters. Economic relations were an integral part of Christian worship and thus under the umbrella of items that God got to have a say in. Their checkbooks, their lifestyles were just as much a sign of their spirituality as were their prayers.

V. ABOUT THE OFFERING

This is my first "stewardship season" with you. I want you to know right up front that I will never apologize for talking about money or asking you to give. I will do it often and gladly, without embarrassment [although, to be honest, I will pretty much limit the money part to this time of year]. Why? Because our generosity is the touchstone of our discipleship... giving is simply what Christians do. Jesus, well aware of the predicaments all people face, spoke a great deal about money, knowing that we can lose our hearts to it – that is why where our money goes is so important.

A number of years back a colleague was lamenting a stewardship phone call with a parishioner. The phone conversation began with an apology that there would be no pledge this year as it had been a particularly tough year and things were very tight. Then, without skipping a beat the church member extended an invitation, "my wife and I have season tickets in a box right behind home plate – we'd like you and your wife to join us next Saturday night for the baseball game." Indeed, our financial decisions reflect our deepest loyalties... they show us what we hold most dear.

We are not raising money here, we are growing Christians whose lives are committed to what God has asked us to do in the world. What God has asked of us is to raise the next generation of Christians who will take the baton from our hands. God has commissioned us to feed the hungry and house the poor and share the good news of Jesus with the world.

Every week when the ushers are called forward for the offering it is a reminder that our faith is not simply the ethereal stuff of prayer or the magnificence of our music or the mysteries of the Lord's Supper. In the offering we are reminded each week that our faith has got to have legs – our faith has to do with the everyday stuff of our work and our daily cares and concerns – "what we eat, what we wear, where we live, how we vote." The offering time is our statement of faith. In Presbyterian-Church-speak the offering is that part of worship called "Responding to the Word." It is when we respond with our checkbooks – not to whether the sermon stirred us, whether the music moved us, or whether we are in a good mood – but to the reality of God's unconditional love in Jesus Christ.

As former Dean of the Duke University Chapel Will Willimon puts it, the offering time "is the test of our worship." He asks, "Is the [worship] service only a time to sing a few

hymns, think a few lofty thoughts, feel a few warm fuzzies, and go home to a big meal? Or is [our worship where we also] “put our money where our mouth is? The offering isn’t an unwarranted intrusion; it is the acid test of what we are about.”ⁱⁱ

I wonder how we might prepare differently for the offering time each Sunday morning if we understood the ushers and their little round plates as an opportunity for reflection about the state of our souls. An opportunity to think through the financial decisions of the week and the spending priorities they reflect – what do they say about where our hearts are? What if we were to ask ourselves each Sunday as the choir sings... “What does what I give say about my heart, about what I truly value?” “What do I want it to say?”

VI. SATISFACTORY GIVING

A Lutheran pastor tells the story of having made an appeal in his sermon for a large and important cause. After the service a member of the church, a woman, came to him and handed him a check for \$500, asking at the same time if her gift was satisfactory. The pastor replied, “It is, if it represents your heart.”

She thought for a minute and asked for her check back. She took it with her and a day or two later she returned, handing the pastor another check, this time for \$5,000... again she asked the question, “Is my gift satisfactory?” The pastor gave the same answer as before, “It is, if it represents your heart.” After a few moments of thoughtful hesitation she took her check back and went home.

Later in the week she came again with a check. This time it was for \$18,000. As she put it in the pastor’s hand, she said, “After earnest, prayerful thought and a whole lot of struggle, I have come to the conclusion that **THIS** gift represents my heart and I am delighted to give it.”

What is crucial in this story is not the amount the woman gave – it is that her gift represented her heart, and she could give it with satisfaction. My goal this morning is not to stir up guilt – as sermons on money can do. It is simply to – in the financial arena of your stewardship life – are you content? Does your giving reflect your heart... Does what you will write on the little line on the pledge card this week reflect the depth of your gratitude and love for God? Does your check register reflect your truest values?

Why is there a place in our worship for an offering? Whether we give through the mail or once a month, the offering time is an opportunity to say thank you for what God has given us in Jesus Christ. It is a reminder that we are privileged to be part of what God is up to on our planet. It is an opportunity to fulfill our most fundamental identity – as stewards. It is our opportunity to bless the world.

VII. PRAYER: Lord, as we struggle to be faithful in a tumultuous world, we ask that your Spirit may, as in early times embolden us to be gracious, and generous, grateful and glad.
AMEN AND AMEN.

ⁱ Jim Wallis, *Call to Conversion*, p.

ⁱⁱ Will Willimon, *With Glad and Generous Hearts*, April 21, 2002 Pulpit Resources