

With Glad and Generous Hearts¹

Acts 2:42-47

First Presbyterian Church

November 8, 2020

Acts 2:42-47

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³Awe came upon everyone because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Sermon

I want to talk to you this morning about an act of worship that has fallen on hard times of late... times so hard you might not even consider it as worship. I'm referring, of course, to the OFFERING. In the early church, the offering consisted of the people's gifts of bread and wine for the holy meal. And according to Justin Martyr, after the service, the leftovers were taken to "the orphans and the widows, to those who are needy because of sickness or other cause, and the captives, and the strangers who sojourn among us."² Now that's not how I grew up thinking about the offering. No, at the Second Ponce de Leon Baptist Church in Atlanta, the offering was collected by several somber-looking men in dark suits passing plates down every other pew as the organ played softly in the background. You can imagine my shock when I learned from one of my seminary professors who had spent time visiting churches in Africa (Kairos: that the offering could be like this!) Play video (Sanctuary: dance their offering to the front of the church with singing and instruments and joy!) Now, I have to confess that sometimes the offering feels to me like the low-energy part of the service – no offence to the musicians who play or the choir that sings – but it sometimes feels like: "OK, we've sung a couple of hymns... the worship team or choir has offered a beautiful song... we've heard a mediocre sermon and been led in prayer... and now it's time to pay the light bill." And the truth is the offering feels sort of antiquated in a world of online banking and Venmo and some churches that even have ATM kiosks in their lobby. So, sometimes I wonder: isn't there a more efficient way for the church to collect its due? And might there be a better use of those precious worship minutes than passing plates that collect fewer and fewer bills and envelopes each week?

Well, having now publicly confessed all my liturgical heresy, I want to say a word in favor of the offering as an important and even necessary act of worship. And here's why.

¹ This sermon follows closely William H. Willimon's sermon with the same title. It can be found in *First Fruits: 14 Sermons on Stewardship*, edited by David Mosser and Brian Bauknight (Abingdom, 2003), p. 48-51.

² Justin Martyr

The persistent danger, against which we Christians must be eternally vigilant, is the tendency to divorce Sunday worship from the other six days of the week. It is the danger that all our hymns, our anthems, our organ preludes and postludes, our eloquent preaching, our beautiful church buildings... it is the danger that all of those wonderful things might conspire to turn worship into an event that has nothing to do with everyday life. Or looked at another way, unless there is some link between our worship of God and our child's spilt cereal at breakfast and the incredibly stressful day we have tomorrow and the test we have scheduled at the hospital next week... then our worship is not only irrelevant to human need, but unfaithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ. And the offering – obligatory and antiquated as it may seem – makes the connection between our Sunday worship and our daily lives.

You see, we must never think that Sunday worship is mostly a “spiritual” affair. Christianity is an incarnational faith – meaning it is “in the body.” There may be religions in which it's all about what you do in a particular holy place... there may be religions where things like politics and physical health and sex and money are not important. But Christianity is not one of those religions... and Jesus is not some ethereal being. He is a visible, tangible sign that God truly loved us by coming “in the body” – by becoming “incarnate” in the person of a Jewish carpenter's son from Nazareth. He is the Lord who comes... NOT to take us out of this world... but to give us a way to live fully and abundantly IN this world.

And every time we give an offering... I dare say every November when we make a pledge to the church... we give tangible, visible expression to the everyday-ness and materiality of our faith. We lift up ordinary things like water and bread and wine... and yes, pledge cards and money... and we say that because of Jesus, these ordinary things take on new significance for us. You all know how in his ministry, Jesus was always taking everyday stuff – like seeds and birds and flowers and coins and even children – Jesus was always lifting them up and setting them in the context of God's kingdom and thereby giving them redemptive significance. So that after meeting Jesus... after listening to his stories and hearing his teaching... you and I can't walk by a homeless person, we can't lift up a loaf of bread, pick a flower, or gaze into the eyes of a child quite the same way as we did before meeting him... because ours is an incarnational faith.

So, tell me – how many times have you felt like your ministers were urging you to “get out there and do something,” but never gave you anything specific to do. Well, now... in the offering... and now, on pledge commitment Sunday... I'm offering you something specific to do. This is certainly not the ONLY thing you can do... but the offering is a test of our worship... a test of what we are about. So, is this a time to sing a few hymns, think a few lofty thoughts, and go home to a big meal? Or is this a time to put our money where our mouth is? Remember how Jesus said that our hearts are usually wherever our money is. So, we should never apologize or be embarrassed by this act of worship we call the offering... because it is the link – it is the connection between the spiritual and the material parts of our lives.

I wonder if you heard this connection in our lesson today? The Book of Acts says that after Easter and at the end of Pentecost, the church gathered on a weekly basis. They would devote themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship with each other... they would break bread and pray together. Well, that's US on Sundays, right? That's US doing worship like the first apostles. Yet, the scripture continues, "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."

THAT'S the link between their worship in church and their lives in the world... that's the connection between our worship in this building and our worship in daily life... that's the bridge between Sunday and Monday.

You want to know the test of our worship? It's only partly about how well we sing the songs and pray the prayers and listen to the word. The real test of our worship That singing and praying and listening is able to produce "glad and generous hearts" so that we are together... and together we are concerned with those in need. The real test is how well we connect what we do today with how we live tomorrow... so let it be with glad and generous hearts that we offer ourselves and our gifts to God... every day!