

The Offering
Sixth in a Series about Worship
from the pulpit of
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Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
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Readings: Deuteronomy 26:1-11
James 1:17-18

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I don't know whether any of you notice this, but every year the church's stewardship season coincides with the Fall Fund Drive of National Public Radio. It brings out the worst in me. If you listen to NPR, then on and off, all day, every day this week, we have been subjected to their relentless appeals. They set hourly goals to bring in a certain number of pledges, they have competitions between people of various professions to see whether the medical personnel, or the legal profession, or the educators will be more supportive. Then, they really pull on our competitive nature by challenging the alums of Penn and Pitt, Penn State and the Ivy Leagues to see who will more generously give to public radio. Not only that, they give prizes for certain giving levels. This year they appeal to our grief with a cartoon mug designed by Philadelphia's beloved Tony Auth; or our love of the outdoors with a giant NPR golf umbrella; or our intellectual curiosity with a CD of the greatest hit interviews of Terry Gross.

You can imagine what I'm thinking while I listen to all of this. For the church stewardship campaign, all the airtime I get is a fifteen minute sermon, and the only prize you receive is a year-end statement for your taxes that says, "No goods or services were received for this charitable contribution."

It was NPR's campaign a couple of years ago that really brought out my competitive nature, and it wasn't pretty. Remember when Ira Glass would hit up those poor folks coming out of Starbucks, asking how much they listen to NPR and what they pay for their coffee habit? It went something like this:

So, do you listen to public radio?... How many hours a day....
oh all the time, as much as four hours a day.
And what did you say you paid for that Grande? Three eighty?
Twice a day? That adds up you know...
Don't you think I ought to get paid?

So while Ira Glass was reflecting about feeling sorry for the guy on the sidewalk who is sweating he feels so guilty for not contributing to NPR, I start imagining the church's stewardship committee interviewing church members outside Starbucks, or the department store, or the car dealer, or the Kimmel Center, or your favorite sports venue, asking things like: "How important is God in your life? ...What does the church mean to you? ...And, you spent how much to get in there just now?"

Now, that was a fantasy brought on by a secular fundraising technique – because you know – and I know – the church does not work that way, and for good reason. Our job is largely intangible. What the church gives is priceless. We nurture faith, we keep baptismal promises, we make disciples of Jesus Christ, we throw seeds of hope into the wind, with no idea where they will land or if they'll take root, we proclaim the love, grace, mercy and peace of God.

The church cannot ask you to pay for that and send you home with a prize. We give to the church not because of what we might get out of it; but because we are being transformed. Christian stewardship is a spiritual practice of growing in generosity, because God is the source of life itself and of all our many blessings. All we can do is invite you to respond to God with a grateful heart. How did James put it? ...*to the Father of Lights who gave us birth.* We make our offerings every Sunday because we are growing in faith to be bearers of God's kingdom in this world, to be instruments of God's grace and peace, to be people who share God's love with others, in a word, to become more Christ-like.

The next time you get in your car, I invite you to turn off the radio, to breathe deeply, to consider the love in your life, and to ponder the autumn leaves set ablaze by the glory of God.

That's where our Old Testament story began. You remember. The nomadic ancestors of ancient Israel had wandered into Egypt, and were taken into slavery. An angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in a blazing bush that was not consumed. And the voice of the Lord spoke to Moses and said:

“I have observed the misery of my people in Egypt,
I have heard their cry, I know their sufferings,
and I have come down to deliver them.”

Our scripture reading from Deuteronomy remembers what the God of the burning bush said, and did. They stand on the brink of the Promised Land. Behind them is a long season of living under the bondage of slavery in Egypt for generations. Immediately behind them is a forty year passage through the Wilderness in which they relied on the Lord, day by day, to provide what they needed – water, bread, guidance each day and night. With all of that behind them, on the bank of the Jordan River, they overlook a land flowing with milk and honey which stretches out before them as far as the eye can see.

This is their big leap from slavery into freedom, from life as refugees to settled home-owners, from worrying about daily bread to harvesting crops, from pain and uncertainty to promise fulfilled. So the first thing Moses does is to give them specific instructions about worship.

While one long, hard journey is coming to an end, a new challenge lies ahead. Coming out of Egypt, they knew who delivered them. In the Wilderness they knew their daily dependence upon God. But in this new life of prosperity, over time they might come to think of the land as *their own*, rather than as a gift from God; their work as *their own toil* rather than a blessing from the hand of God; their freedom as *their own entitlement*, rather than the Saving Act of God. They might forget who and whose they are.

So Moses instructs them in a spiritual practice to carry them into this new season of hope and plenty. Take the first fruits of the harvest to the temple and offer them to God in order to remember the Giver of the land and all its benefits.

In the Bible, first fruits are not offerings that originate from the people to be given to God. First fruits acknowledge that the earth is the Lord's, and we are mere stewards – we are caretakers – of what already belongs to God. This is why, in our order of worship, the Offering comes after the proclamation of the Word. We remember what God has done for us; and then in response to the liberating, gracious, loving provision of our Creator and Redeemer, we return a portion of what has been given to us.

Peter Singer is an ethics professor at Princeton who has written a provocative book about caring for people in the world in a way that makes a difference. It's called *The Life You Can Save*. He relates the story of Tom Hsieh and his wife, Bree. Together they made a commitment to live on less than the United States median annual income, which was \$ 46,000 at the time, and to give the rest away, mostly to Christian organizations helping the poor in developing countries.

Singer writes: Tom says he doesn't know whether or not his giving has saved the lives of others, but he is certain it has saved his own: "I could have easily lived a life that was boring and inconsequential. Now I am graced with a life of service and meaning."¹

Perhaps in a smaller, but no less regular way, that is what the weekly offering we receive in worship is meant to be – the recognition that we are already saved for a life of service and meaning by the gracious hand of the living God. The ancient biblical story that precedes our weekly offering is – no less – *our* story:

A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien... When the Egyptians treated us harshly, we cried to the Lord, and the Lord heard our voice. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand, with a terrifying display of power, with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place, and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey..."

This *is* the story of our life and faith. We may not remember what it was like when we were slaves in Egypt, but many of us can remember a time when the heavy burden of guilt was lifted by the saving assurance of God's forgiveness. We may not remember what it felt like to be hungry back in those Wilderness days, but

¹ Quoted by Anthony Robinson, *Stewardship for Vital Congregations*, p. 24.

we all know what it's like to eat our fill and be grateful. We may not remember how chilly and cold that Jordan River was, but this morning we are privileged to watch six beautiful and beloved children cross through those waters of baptism, into the household of God, a passage made on nothing but a promise of a parent's faith, God's grace, and trust in the church to see it through.

Professor of Worship Liturgy, Gordon Lathrop, reminds us that when we enter this sanctuary each week, we are entering sacred time. The importance of the Exodus, he says, is not that it occurred to us historically, but that the images of liberation, crossing the sea, sustenance in the wilderness constitute us by faith in the one merciful God who made heaven and earth. Christian faith, Lathrop says, trusts that this weekly assembly, in this time, on this ground, gathers us before the same God to whom this text bears witness.²

So that having heard the Word of God,
and having remembered...
slavery.... a burning bush....
a God who sees and hears and attends to suffering....

liberation... manna in the morning...
a pillar of fire by night...
a land flowing with milk and honey...
...The saving grace of Jesus Christ...

Who comes to church, and does not want to respond to that: from sheer gratitude to generosity.

AMEN.

² Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Ground: A Liturgical Cosmology*, p. 166.