

The Offering

Text: John 4:7-12; Numbers 18:21-29

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on June 27, 2021

You've heard it said sometimes that a person "knows just enough to be dangerous." That doesn't necessarily mean a person is learning to be violent, it just means that when we know a little bit about something, we might do something we would never do if we knew more. This was clearly the case with me before I went into ministry when I was just a regular member of a United Methodist church in Florida.

My issue was with the offering. I had no issue with taking up the offering or with giving. My family trained me to give ten percent of my income when I was a teenager and I have kept that up gladly. My issue was the practice of putting the offering plates on the altar after the plates were full and even lifting them high before doing so. The little bit of knowledge I had told me that the altar was where important things went, and it seemed to me that we were glorifying money when we put the plates on the altar. It smelled of idolatry to me.

That thought grew and grew in my mind until I could hardly stand it. We were worshipping money, I thought. It's not right. So, I began to complain, loudly. I got others on my side, and I'm sure the pastor must have prayed nightly for me to suddenly find another church more compelling. Finally, I voiced my complaint to one woman in the church who simply said, "Oh, I just always assumed that since the altar was the place of sacrifice, that's where the money we sacrifice to God should go." Bingo. The light shone and the pastor rested well from that point onward.

I had a little bit of information...the altar was where important things go. And in my defense, that would have been correct had I still been in the Baptist church where I grew up. The offering was never put on the table there—that was where the Bible went. But I had changed denominations and no one had ever explained that the table for important things in the world of Baptists became an altar of sacrifice in the United Methodist Church; and that other information made all the difference. Now I'm the one who puts the plates on the altar, and I really like doing it. I like lifting them up to God as our offering.

Remembering the struggle I had, and knowing the struggles we all have around issues of money, I decided to do some teaching this morning on what the offering is and does. Its roots go way back in the Old Testament to the time when Israel was formed as a nation. There were 12 different tribes that made up the nation of Israel...and really, the whole nation was related since the 12 tribes were the descendants of the twelve sons of one man. Pop quiz...who was that one man? Jacob. The guy who wrestled with God at the ford of the Jabbok River.

When the 12 tribes came into the land of Canaan—what is now Israel/Palestine—eleven of the twelve tribes were given land to settle. The twelfth tribe, the tribe of Levi, was not given any land. They were given a job instead. You heard in the reading from Numbers this morning how God told Moses that the tribe of Levi was to spend all its time and energy taking care of the tabernacle, which was the moveable tent that served as their place of worship before the Temple was built. In Christian language, the tribe of Levi was told they were to work full time in the church.

Because of that, they would have no time left over to grow crops or herd animals and would therefore have no food and no way to provide for their families. But church workers deserved their

wages just as much as others, so God came up with the idea of the tithe. God said to the other eleven tribes...okay, the Levites are performing an important service. They are making sure that the worship of God stays active and true in the community. Since that takes all their time, the rest of you need to bring ten percent of everything you get to them so they can provide for themselves and for their families. That's what a tithe is: Giving ten percent for the support and maintenance of the church and its workers.

And no cheating, says God. Don't bring the leftover sour stuff for the Levites. Farmers, bring ten percent of your best crops. Shepherds, don't go bringing diseased animals...bring the good ones, the best ones. And so the practice of the tithe began. People brought tithes and then they also brought offerings, which were additional gifts, above and beyond the tithe to help the poor and needy. That is why we often use the phrase "tithes and offerings" together. They are distinct things...tithes support the maintenance of the church and the offerings are given to those in need.

That was still the system about 1500 years later in Jesus' day, and after Jesus' death and resurrection, the early church gave it still more meaning. In the early days of the church, after Jewish Christians had been booted from the synagogues and before the church was established as an institution, there wasn't really anything like the Temple to be maintained. "The church" was simply gatherings of people in different homes where they studied together, told the good news about Jesus, and shared in a meal together...which they brought, potluck. The earliest churches looked more like coffee hour than our worship today.

They didn't really need a tithe to support a building or workers anymore, but they did still need offerings—they needed to care for the poor and the widows and orphans. We see in the book of Acts, that Paul travels to the churches in Asia Minor, asking them to contribute to an offering for the poor back in Jerusalem.

This is a gross oversimplification, but hundreds of years went by, and finally the Roman Emperor Constantine decided that Christianity should be the official religion of the Empire. Freed up from persecution and officially supported by the state, churches could really put down roots...build cathedrals, support schools for religious training, and all sorts of things. Voila. Now there is again a need for maintenance. There is still a need to give to the charitable work of the church, however, so the need for the tithe returns and the need for the offerings remains.

Up until the last couple hundred years, the "offering" time in the worship service was completely tied to the sacrament of Communion. As Cyril Richardson describes in his book *The Church Throughout The Centuries*, "Each Christian brought some bread and wine and this was collected by the deacons and consecrated by the bishop or elders, so that the united offerings of the people became one sacrament. At the Eucharist they also 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."

Apparently, we didn't invent the "bring your own communion elements" part of our pandemic worship! What all of that meant was that, during a worship service, the offering of the people was a direct response to the offering of Christ for us. The passage we read this morning from first John

says that we love because God first loved us. That is the reason we give as well. We give, because God first gave to us.

When the offering is a response to what God has already given to us, then we are in a better position to understand the practices of some cultures where the offering is the highlight of the worship service. For several years I shared Thanksgiving dinner with a Christian man from Ghana. We got to talking about the offering one year and he told me about how much fun that is in his church in Ghana. People don't wait for the plates to be passed to them. They literally get up and dance their way to the front, eager to bring any gift they can to the God who has given them life. That portion of the service alone has been known to last an hour. He said he missed that here. He said that churches here didn't seem to enjoy the offering, and he was completely baffled.

In a number of churches today the connection between God's self-giving and our giving is kept by having the communion elements brought forward when the plates are brought forward, so that we can remember that when God gives, God gives everything...broken body, shed blood. God is a generous, abundant giver, and it's that giving that we are called to emulate as we try to become more like Jesus. Disciples do what the teacher does, and in this case the teacher, Jesus, gives.

So that is what the offering time is all about. If the church wants to go back to the way it was very early on, we wouldn't need the tithes. If you want to get rid of the buildings and trained teachers, you can just gather in homes each week, share your faith with each other and bring potluck to share. There's a house-church movement today that is doing just that. As you sit around that fuller table of communion and remember what Jesus gave to us, your own giving to those in need should be a mirror of and a response to Christ's gift to you.

But if you want to gather together in larger numbers in a comfortable space. If you want to be inspired by excellent music, want programs for yourselves and for your children, and want to have the benefit of trained leadership, then God's provision in the Hebrew Scriptures is again appropriate. We need the tithes as well as the offerings. The amazing thing to me is that across four thousand years, inflation has not touched the church's need. Ten percent would still do it. If everybody just took for granted that ten percent of income goes for the work of the church, we would never see another financial campaign, never have to sign another pledge card. Our needs would be met and we could focus on the real work of the Body of Christ.

During our worship service we put the offering after the sermon to try to show that our offering of money is a response to the Word of God. It's a response to the Good News proclaimed to us that God loves us so much that God would go so far as to become human—to live and die as one of us—in order to win our love. We love because God first loved us. We give because God first gave to us. We give because God took the sting out of death for us. We give because that's what lovers do.

I am so grateful that my parents taught me to tithe and to give—not just because it's a good discipline that helps me keep money in its proper place in my life, but because it's fun. Even before my giving was helping to pay my own salary, I loved the feeling of giving—both to the church and to individuals in need. One of my dreams has been to one day have enough money to go into a shabby restaurant in a struggling area and tip the waitress a thousand dollars. Just because it would be fun. Even if the food and service was terrible.

I don't like to be put on a guilt trip about giving...nobody does. What I'm trying to say is that, just like with my experience with the offering plates on the altar, there comes a point in Christian life when the light bulb goes on—when what was once an objection is fully understood and integrated and it becomes a joy. There was a point in my life of giving that I gave because it was my duty. God said to do it (as did my mother), so I did. But I grew from that point, and now it is a joy—it's a joyful response to the God who first loved and gave to me. And you? Amen.