

The What and Why of Offering

An installment in an occasional sermon series

“What Happens in Church” by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher

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- Deuteronomy 16:13-17 (Good News Translation)¹³ “After you have threshed all your grain and pressed all your grapes, celebrate the Festival of Shelters for seven days. ¹⁴ Enjoy it with your children, your servants, and the Levites, foreigners, orphans, and widows who live in your towns. ¹⁵ Honor the LORD your God by celebrating this festival for seven days at the one place of worship. Be joyful, because the LORD has blessed your harvest and your work. ¹⁶ “All the men of your nation are to come to worship the LORD three times a year at the one place of worship: at Passover, Harvest Festival, and the Festival of Shelters. Each man is to bring a gift ¹⁷ as he is able, in proportion to the blessings that the LORD your God has given him.
- 2 Corinthians 9:6-15 (Good News Translation) ⁶ Remember that the person who plants few seeds will have a small crop; the one who plants many seeds will have a large crop. ⁷ You should each give, then, as you have decided, not with regret or out of a sense of duty; for God loves the one who gives gladly. ⁸ And God is able to give you more than you need, so that you will always have all you need for yourselves and more than enough for every good cause. ⁹ As the scripture says, “He gives generously to the needy; his kindness lasts forever.” ¹⁰ And God, who supplies seed for the sower and bread to eat, will also supply you with all the seed you need and will make it grow and produce a rich harvest from your generosity. ¹¹ He will always make you rich enough to be generous at all times, so that many will thank God for your gifts which they receive from us. ¹² For this service you perform not only meets the needs of God's people, but also produces an outpouring of gratitude to God. ¹³ And because of the proof which this service of yours brings, many will give glory to God for your loyalty to the gospel of Christ, which you profess, and for your generosity in sharing with them and everyone else. ¹⁴ And so with deep affection they will pray for you because of the extraordinary grace God has shown you. ¹⁵ Let us thank God for his priceless gift!
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Our time of offering can serve as a time for us to ask ourselves, “How can I more closely connect my faith and my living?”

Our governing board, the Session, divides into groups that are responsible for different parts of our church's life. One such group, our Worship Committee, works with me to evaluate the meaningfulness of our worship services and to plan for upcoming worship services or seasons of the church year. Members of the Worship Committee always welcome feedback about your experience in worship—something that you found particularly inspiring, or something novel that we tried which didn't do much for you.

Some time ago someone made a suggestion to the Worship Committee: “Could Jon offer a series of messages to help us understand *why* we do *what* we do in a typical worship service?” I liked the idea, but only now am I getting around to it. Actually, I'm just starting to get around to it. You may have noticed that this sermon is referred to as “an installment in an occasional sermon series.” An “occasional” series is not going to happen for consecutive weeks. Rather, I'll return to this topic from time to time in the months and years ahead. Future installments will explore other questions like “Why do we have a Prayer of Confession?” or “Who are we talking to in a Call to Worship?”

But today: the offering. An offering is not an exercise to be sure the ushers haven't fallen asleep in the vestibule. It's not merely an opportunity for the organist to show off. And while you might think,

“Well, it’s the time when the church ‘shakes down’ the worshipers so we can pay the bills,” even collecting gifts of money isn’t at the heart of the action we call the offering.

The offering of gifts is an ancient practice; the Old Testament describes many types of offerings. It was customary to make an offering of the first-fruits of a harvest or a herd (a sort of “paying-right-off-the-top” offering). People also presented offerings as part of the act of consecrating people or things. There were offerings to celebrate victories or answers to prayer, offerings to express remorse, offerings to commemorate meaningful event, offerings to show gratitude. “The offering was a major festive occasion in Old Testament times.” When believers were given the opportunity to present their offering at the Temple, it was a party. People were joyful, excited; they feasted to celebrate the opportunity to honor their God with gifts.¹ So the practice of making an offering has ancient roots.

Jump ahead to what I’ll call “modern Christianity” of the last few hundred years. Offerings were not always the primary source of income for churches in our country. In colonial times right up to the early 1900s there were many churches – including Presbyterian – which derived significant operating income from pew rentals. Yes, it was sort of a “pay-to-pray” system. Your family would pay rent to the church for your family’s exclusive rights to a particular pew – often the type of enclosed boxy pews you’ve seen in photographs from Williamsburg or Boston’s Old North Church or Mt. Vernon. (Unlike today, church-goers back then strove to sit as close to the front as possible.) In some churches the fees from pew rents were more significant than the weekly collection.

But a time of offering in worship never went away. We can thank traveling evangelists of the 1700s-1800s for the increase in popularity of the offering as a worship ritual to collect gifts of money. Of course, those traveling evangelists couldn’t charge pew rent, since they probably were holding services outdoors on a hillside or at a riverbank. So they would call for a collection of gifts at every service, and not merely for their own benefit. Those evangelists were also establishing hospitals and schools and orphanages, and the offerings supported those works.

Those evangelists’ impassioned calls for offerings led to the ritual of receiving gifts of money in worship becoming customary. Some churches still begin the time of offering with urgent pleas laced with passion and a little guilt. Most churches simply launch into a lovely musical interlude to fill the time when the collection is taken. The way most churches carry out the offering ritual, it’s primarily passive. Except for the musicians offering inspiring music and the ushers taking a slow stroll down and up the aisle, for worshipers an offering is not very participatory. In this two- to three-minute interval what are the people doing? Probably not praying, or studying the Bible, or contemplating how our lives could embody the way of Jesus more fully or more clearly. No, we tend to sit still, add our names to the Fellowship Register, eventually engage for a second or two to pass a plate. This passive time concludes with us standing to sing. Even then, we sing something that offers the comfort of familiarity – “Praise God, from whom all blessings flow...” – but that same familiarity numbs us to the message of the words we sing.

Another thing that contributes to the time of offering feeling rather passive is peoples’ pattern of giving. Decades ago many workers were paid weekly, and a weekly offering made sense. Today, employees and retirees tend to receive their checks monthly or bi-weekly, and many people tend to give their offering once a month. As a result, they’re not sure how to react when the offering plate comes to them the other Sundays of the month.

A different pattern of giving arises for farmers (we don’t have many at this church), or real estate agents, sales people, or other self-employed persons whose income is episodic or unpredictable. It’s harder for them to know when or how much they’ll get paid and consequently when and how much they’ll be able to give as their offering. For them too the approach of the offering plate each week can bring anxiety.

Can anything change? More and more, churches (including ours) are reimagining how we provide opportunities for people to make offerings. Some churches have eliminated a time of offering as

¹ Herb Mather, Don’t Shoot the Horse (’Til You Know How to Drive the Tractor): Moving from Annual Fundraising to a Life of Giving. Nashville, Tennessee: Discipleship Resources, 1994, p.57

part of a worship service. If you think that's radical, consider this: our 8:30 a.m. Early Worship begins its seventeenth summer season at the end of this month. In all those years that service hasn't included a time of offering; there's simply a collection plate available in the lobby to receive worshippers' offerings.

Many churches (including ours) are looking at expanding the options for how people can make gifts to the church. Our church already offers a free automatic withdrawal of pledge offerings once or twice a month. Mary and I have done that for years and love its convenience. Churches are making it possible for people to give regular or special offerings online, by text, by credit and debit card, or by on-demand transfers. The practice of only having a Sunday morning collection still meets the needs of some people, but more and more, people want to be able to make gifts by a variety of means and on a schedule not restricted to three minutes on a Sunday morning.

You might caution, "But aren't we risking doing away with an ancient practice of the church – receiving peoples' offerings during worship?" The original practice of offering in early Christianity had nothing to do with money. An "offertory" has been around since the early days of Christianity, but it wasn't a piece of music to fill the time of taking a collection. An offertory was the time in the service (back then, the "mass") when the communion elements of bread and wine were "offered" to God to be set apart from ordinary to sacred use. Here's a description according to a theologian at New York's Union Theological Seminary,

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. Then during the actual communion, people gave gifts of money and goods to support "shipwrecked sailors, orphans, widows, captives, and the unemployed."²

So the act of making an "offering" was a time to remember what God has done for us and, in turn, to remember what we can do for people in need.

To symbolize this connection between our gifts and God's gift of Jesus, some years ago we made a small change to our communion services. You may have noticed that rather than having the bread and wine pre-set on the communion table before the service, we bring forward the chalice and the loaf as part of our offering ritual. Is it because we forgot to do it earlier? No. It's a subtle way of remembering what the early Christians believed: that what we offer for the sake of the world is connected with the immeasurable love God has offered to us in Jesus Christ.

And that is the role the offertory can fill for us today. We can give money for the work of the church in cash or check or bank transfer. We can give our offering weekly or monthly, quarterly or annually, or sporadically as God makes it possible. In whatever manner we give, whatever amount we give, whenever we give, our time of offering can serve as a time for us to ask ourselves, "How can I more closely connect my *faith* and my *living*? How can *what I believe* shape the *choices* I make and the *actions* I take?"

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² Ibid., p. 60