

*“The Offering”*

*Psalm 90; Matthew 22:34-46*

*Reformation Sunday and Choir Recognition Sunday, October 26, 2014*

*Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut*

*The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor*

There was a woman who had a very strong Christian faith which she tried to share with her son-in-law. A day would dawn and she would say “Praise God!” The sun would shine and she would say, “Praise God for this beautiful day.” The clouds and rain would come and she would say, “Praise God, the farmers need the rain.” In all circumstances she found a way to praise God.

This irritated her son-in-law who said, “Mom, there’s no God. Why do you continue to act as though there is?” She replied, “Praise you, Lord, he’s still using your name.”

One day the woman had a fall and, sadly, broke her leg. She returned home from the hospital with limited mobility. “Where is your God now?” challenged the son-in-law. “How will you get out to get groceries. God certainly won’t provide them for you.” She replied, “Praise God, for God will find a way.”

The son-in-law had enough of this. He went to the store, bought several bags of groceries, brought them back and put them at the front door. He rang the doorbell and hid in the bushes by the door. Slowly the woman got to the door. She opened it, saw the bags of groceries and shouted, “Praise you Lord, you did provide.”

At that moment the son-in-law jumped out from behind the bushes and said, “Mom, it wasn’t God, it was me. **I** bought the groceries and **I** brought them here for you.” The woman shouted, “Praise you, Lord, you brought me groceries **and** made the Devil pay for them!”

Things are not always as they seem. Giving, ultimately, is not about giving. It is about helping others, doing good, being faithful and honoring God. That is what I want to convey in this message entitled “The Offering.”

Quick, audience participation time! Since we are about to have ten new members join the church today, let me ask for a show of hands: how many of you joined the church primarily because you wanted to help the church pay its bills? Right! In fact, in nearly 40 years of pastoral ministry I have never found a person who said that is why they joined the church. The bad news is that there are some churches—I spoke at length with one of their pastors this week—whose leadership desires their church membership to grow so that the church can pay the bills. The good news is that our church is not one of these.

Yet it is disingenuous to say that the offering is not important. When people join the church they promise to support it with their prayers, presence, *gifts*, service and witness. A hard reality for our church is that we have over 500 members but an average worship attendance of 175 and 100 regular givers. I say this to observe that while this is a great church there is also room for spiritual growth that has nothing to do with new people, but the growth and commitment of the people already here. The offering is a symptom, not a cause, in this or any other church. It is one reflection of commitment, a reflection that we dare not ignore.

This commitment has several expressions. At its purest form it is a response to God. Some of you will recognize the name David Livingston, the noteworthy explorer and Christian missionary of the African continent in the late 1800's. When presumed lost, a search party was dispatched, led by Henry Stanley who, upon finding him, uttered the immortal phrase, "Dr. Livingston, I presume?"

Someone said to David Livingston that it must be a great sacrifice to do what he did for Christ, enduring so many hardships in sharing the Gospel in Africa. Livingston responded that the only sacrifice is to live outside the will of God.

Most of us, your pastor included, are a bit more wedded to self-interest. How does that work in relation to the offering? Herb

Miller tells a story about a woman who struggled with bouts of depression for many years (1). She said that most people do not need money and material things as much as they think. “What they really need,” she said, “is something to feel important about, something that makes them feel worthwhile.” She described the treatment she had learned to use when she felt a depression settling in. “I get out a pencil and paper and make a list of the things to which I am giving my life that are of supreme worth. When I do that, the depression sometimes vanishes.”

This brings us to the Gospel and Jesus’ teaching about love. Few will object to the idea that a commitment to love is a value of supreme worth to which our lives should be given. Yet in chapter 22, Matthew describes three attempts by Jesus’ adversaries to entrap him. They rightly sense that his unwavering commitment to love will undermine all other loyalties, loyalties by which the Sadducees and Pharisees—his adversaries—profit both monetarily and by power and influence.

The love of which Jesus speaks is not essentially sentimental. The Greek word in this text, *agape*, is willed concern for the well-being of another. Whatever warm and gushy feelings we may enjoy when expressing love are secondary to willed and disciplined concern required for its expression. In fact, the son-in-law who was the object of our laughter at the outset was more loving than some of us in his willed concern for his mother-in-law. We may criticize his motives but most of us have mixed motives. The son-in-law’s action was no less loving, his motives aside. He knew she needed groceries, could not get them, and provided them: love expressed, even if does not appear to be from a loving heart. Jesus says this very thing in the parable of the two sons in the previous chapter (21:28-32). Two sons were asked to go work in the vineyard. One said “yes” but did not go; the other said “no” but later changed his mind and went. Jesus then asks his

---

(1) Money Isn’t/Is Everything: What Jesus Said about the Spiritual Power of Money, pp. 24-25.

questioners, “Which of these did the will of God?” The answer is “the one who went.” Jesus tells us today what the will of God is, when he answers the question about the greatest commandment: love of God and love of neighbor is the will of God.

Now, here’s the key that unlocks what may sound like a difficult and demanding expectation to love: God has already given us the ability! It’s already there! Let me tell you another story, my own story. When my son Daniel was four years old, we were driving to an appointment. It was near Christmas time and he had been singing and hearing the carols of the season. He asked me if I knew the carol “Angels We Have Heard on High,” the one with all the “glorias.” I said I did. Responding as a child does, and as we do when we discover some powerful truth and think we are the first one to discover it, he said with amazement “How did you know that song, Daddy?” I said that it was taught to me, that I had learned it. As is his way, he was silent a long time. Then he said thoughtfully, “Daddy, wouldn’t it be great if God borned everybody with a song inside them?”

Not only “would” it be great, it is great, because God has! God has borned everyone here with a song inside them. It’s there! And if you haven’t discovered it yet, what a great discovery awaits you! And it doesn’t have to be sung in your voice or from notes on a page, it is sung with—just as the scriptures promise—your heart and mind and soul and strength. And that is what the offering is about, you see? Singing your song. Acting out love. Being the church in service to the world. In the Sundays to come I’ll give you a list. And I’ll also share what the Bible says about how to figure out what to give. For today, it is enough to know that the God whose law is love is also the God who has already given us a song to sing, a joy to share, a purpose of supreme worth. As you make your offering today, remember these things so that the promise of Jesus, “that my joy may be in you and your joy may be full” will be the most real thing in the world.