

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
September 8, 2019

The Offering Business

Exodus 29:31-46

Pastor Eric Hulstrand was preaching one Sunday when an elderly woman named Mary fainted and struck her head on the end of the pew. Immediately, an EMT in the congregation called an ambulance. As they strapped her to a stretcher and got ready to head out the door, Mary regained consciousness. When she motioned for her daughter to come near, everyone thought she was summoning her strength to convey what could be her final words. The daughter leaned over until her ear was at her mother's mouth, and Mary whispered, "My offering is in my purse."¹

No worship service is complete without the offering. When you stepped through the sanctuary doors on your way out last Sunday, the last thing you may have seen, prior to shaking my hand, was Jerry Coombs standing there with an offering plate, receiving gifts to our church's benevolence fund. And here we are back together again today, offering plates and all. Earlier in our service, you saw a video encouraging you to consider your gift to this year's mission offering for the Baptist Convention of Maryland/Delaware. That's one of the ways we participate in our denomination's work at the state level. Actually, as we begin our state missions emphasis, this week's mail included a packet to help us begin preparation for our international missions focus in December, including the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering.

We're good at passing the plate. In fact, virtually every Sunday, we keep that announcement in the bulletin reminding you that offering envelopes are available on the table in the foyer. And the racks on the back of the pew you're facing include three basic worship items—hymnals, Bibles, and offering envelopes. It seems like we're always in the offering business.

This is nothing new in the life of God's people. In this morning's text from Exodus, we see part of Israel's sacrificial system in action. The rules and regulations for these offerings and sacrifices are elaborate and often very puzzling to us. But they were essential to the way Israel understood the character and purpose of God.

The bottom line was that God is holy. In other words, God is transcendent and beyond us. God isn't your divine mascot, your heavenly buddy, or as others sometimes put it, your "cosmic bellhop," always at your beck and call. No, God's awesome otherness means that you and I are not to approach God casually. Remember, this is the God whose people, several chapters earlier in Exodus, ". . . saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke." They trembled with fear and stayed at a distance, saying to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die" (20:18-19). Being exposed to the presence of God could be life-threatening.

It's no wonder that the priests played such a critical role in the way Israel approached God in worship. Being a priest meant that you were dealing in holy things. Your job was to draw near to God on behalf of the people. So the ordination and consecration of priests was a very detailed and elaborate process, a seven-day ritual that involved being clothed and anointed to represent God's people. If the priest was going to minister in God's holy

presence, he too must be made holy. And this process of making holy included all sorts of sacrificial offerings. In our text, a lot of attention is given to animal sacrifices that purify the priests and the altar. But these animal sacrifices are part of a larger picture that includes sins offerings, burnt offerings, elevation offerings, peace offerings, grain offerings, and drink offerings. Each offering has a certain intention tied to a range of human experiences, such as suffering, forgiveness, joy, and gratitude.

What's more, the ordination of priests is just one episode in the larger story of the relationship between God and his people. Within this larger story, offerings matter. Offerings help the people of Israel mark the different seasons in their journey with God. Offerings help them remember key moments and places in their history with God. Offerings help them experience reconciliation with God. Offerings help them celebrate God's blessings. Offerings help them offer their lives and resources to God. It's impossible for God's people to be God's people without a rich and enduring system of offerings.

In our own life together as God's people in Christ, we too have an identity and a mission that are grounded in offerings. Granted, our practices are different from ancient Israel, and we believe that the offering of Christ himself, in his death of the cross, is what reconciles us to God. Jesus is God's way of forgiving us and making us new. As one commentator has put it, "God moves to transform us from the unholy people we are into the holy people he wants us to be."² And one of the ways we grow in the holiness we have through Christ is by making our offerings. That includes, but also goes beyond, gifts of money.

Christian leader Gordon MacDonald tells a story about an experience that reshaped his understanding of giving. He says:

The process began when my wife, Gail, and I made a missions trip to West Africa. On the first Sunday of our visit, we joined a large crowd of desperately poor Christians for worship. As we neared the church, I noticed that almost every person was carrying something. Some hoisted cages of noisy chickens, others carried baskets of yams, and still others toted bags of eggs or bowls of cassava paste.

"Why are they bringing all that stuff?" I asked one of our hosts. "Watch!" she said. Almost every person in that African congregation brought something: a chicken, a basket of yams, a bowl of cassava paste. I saw that giving, whether yams or dollars, is not optional for Christ followers.

Soon after the worship began, the moment came when everyone stood and poured into the aisles, singing, clapping, even shouting. The people began moving forward, each in turn bringing whatever he had brought to a space in the front. Then I got it. This was West African offering time. The chickens would help others get a tiny farm business started. The yams and the eggs given could be sold in the marketplace to help the needy. The cassava paste would guarantee that someone who was hungry could eat.

I was captivated. I'd never seen a joyful offering before. Obviously, my keep-money-under-the-radar policy would not have worked in that West African church. Those African believers, although they never knew it, had moved me. I began to understand that giving—whether yams or dollars—was not an option for Christ-followers. Rather it was an indication of the direction and the tenor of one's whole life.³

In many ways, the Christian life is an act of giving, a way of making our lives, individually and together, an offering to God, as a grateful response to his saving mercy in Christ. As Paul writes, "I urge you brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship" (Rom. 12:1). So we present ourselves—all that we are and all that we have—to the Lord who, through Jesus, has liberated us from captivity to sin and death and has made us his people, a dwelling place for his presence.

The offering plate is an effective symbol of worship because it captures the movement of God's gifts from our hands into God's hands. When we pass the plate, we're reminding ourselves that we here not primarily to get but to give. Eugene Peterson tells the story about his Uncle Ernie, whom he describes as a "noisy unbeliever, argumentative and protesting."⁴ And yet, at the same time, Ernie was Peterson's favorite uncle, full of jokes and fun. Once a year, on Christmas, Uncle Ernie would come to church. One year, when Peterson was five or six years old, he was sitting beside Ernie in church. The offering plates were passed, and Peterson put in a nickel. Soon after the plate had gone by, Uncle Ernie leaned over to him and whispered, "How much did you get?" That's when he showed Peterson a twenty-dollar bill, half hidden in his hand.

Peterson says that Uncle Ernie ruined his Christmas. He was too ashamed to tell his parents or anyone else. As he puts it, "Not only did my uncle not believe in God; he stole from the God he did not believe in. I kept hearing his words, 'How much did you get?' and seeing the edge of that twenty-dollar bill."⁵ It was years before Peterson realized it was all a joke, but it definitely left an impression.

As I said, Christian worship, and the kind of holy living that flows from it, is primarily about giving, not getting. But at the same time, we're only able to give because we have been given to, by God. The gospel we preach and practice is about a God who, at the very core of his character and action, is a giver. His holiness is communicated and conveyed through his giving. No wonder we're so fond of quoting John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he *gave* his one and only Son" In the Son is God's self-giving, his self-sacrificing love that moves into action to save us. At the cross God makes an offering of himself in order to forgive us and make us holy.

So we're here to make progress in the holiness we have through the Son. We're called to live holy lives and to display God's holiness to the world. And one of the essential ways we do that is by moving further and deeper into the fullness of giving. In order to do that, we need each other in this congregation. This community of believers is always in the offering business. That's why we're here again today. I'll quote Eugene Peterson once more, who says,

A sacrifice is an offering placed before the Lord so that he can make something of it. Once offered it is in God's hand to do with what he will. It is no longer in your hands to improve a little more. . . . His will is to work with offerings, not your perfections or your press clippings. Just leave it. You have lived your day; now leave it on the altar, an offering.⁶

What offerings have you brought with you today? Certainly, your money and financial resources. But also more than that. What other things have you brought to lay on the altar? Perhaps you've brought a prayer. Perhaps you've brought a word of praise. Perhaps you've brought a doubt or a question. Perhaps you've brought a talent or a skill. Perhaps you've brought a burden. Perhaps you've brought your strength. Perhaps you've brought your sickness. Perhaps you've brought your plans. Perhaps you've brought your chaos. Perhaps you're not sure what you've brought, but you're here. You've brought yourself. And that's ultimately the best and greatest offering, your whole self given to a holy and loving God, who can take you and do something with your life to manifest more of his holiness in the world.

¹ *Fresh Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching: From Leadership Journal*. Ed. Edward K. Rowell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997) n.p.

² Derek Tidball, *The Message of Holiness: Restoring God's Masterpiece* (Downer's Grove: Inter-Varsity, 2010) 39.

³ Gordon MacDonald, "Transforming Scrooge." *Leadership Journal* (Summer 2013). Cited at PreachingToday.com. Accessed July 16, 2015 <<http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2013/june/5061013.html>>.

⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, *As Kingfishers Catch Fire: A Conversation on the Ways of God Formed by the Words of God* (New York: WaterBrook, 2017) 138.

⁵ Peterson, *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*, 138.

⁶ Eugene Peterson in *Answering God*. Quoted in *Christianity Today*, Vol. 35, No. 4.