

Lectionary 17 + July 29, 2018

Every Sunday, after the Sharing of the Peace, the Presiding Minister invites us to “offer with joy and thanksgiving what God has first given us.”

Then, during this time of offering, three things happen all at same time.

Each is as an act of offering.

- The Assisting Minister prepares the table for the communion meal
- The collection plates are passed down the pews
- And music is sung and played

How are these actions considered an offering?

- When we place money in the plates as they are passed down the pew, we’re not simply making a contribution or paying dues. Our gifts are offering to God. An act of worship. A gesture of gratitude given in love to God.
- Preparing the table is such a simple thing, but don’t underestimate the power of this simple gesture. You’ll notice the table is prepared with great care and it isn’t rushed. We need not rush this deliberate gesture for as an offering it is an act of love. It’s a lot like setting a table at your home when you have guests over for dinner. You want to set a festive table for the meal being served to your guests. Just so, the assistants prepare this table for meal in which Jesus meets us.
- While all of this is happening, people make music – a choir, an ensemble, a solo, violins, keyboard, trumpets. This music is also an offering to God. Both the preservice music and the music during the offering time is an offering from those providing the music and it assists the worship of the whole assembly.

Three gestures but really ONE act of offering to God that is the response of grateful hearts. An offering in joy and thanksgiving to God who first loved us and continues to love us so richly.

Once the gifts have been presented, they are set on the table and with the table full, the Assisting Minister leads us in an offering prayer and that is followed by the great prayer. The Presider leads us in the Prayer of Thanksgiving, itself an offering of praise to God. You see, one act leads to another. One gesture builds upon the previous one and prepares us for the next. So, yes, even the offering time is an act of worship.

When I was a kid I didn’t quite see it this way. I thought the offering was a time to vamoose and go to the bathroom. I was quickly disabused of that notion by a rather observant and wise elder in the church who told me that my 50-cent offering was just as important as any other amount, and that like singing a hymn or uttering a prayer, it was given to adore God.

The offering time is no intrusion into the service. Nor is it an intermission or a “seventh-inning stretch” but very much a part of the liturgy, a kind of bridge between the service of the Word and the service at the Table.

Like all the liturgy, it begs our active participation.

So, then, how shall we approach this business of offering? How do we cross the bridge from Word to Meal together? How do we make this most of the offering? Even if you do “simply giving” by making your offering electronically, your presence and involvement here is still an offering. How might we approach the offering?

Well, Pastor Van Kley and I have a few ideas ...

First, there’s the matter of music. It’s a perfectly natural thing to applaud people making music at a concert or a play, but not here. Not here. Not at worship. We want to call this to your attention, not because we’re grumpy or fussy but because part of our job as pastors is to steward the mysteries – that is, to help this assembly experience an interface with God. When the music during the offering is received as entertainment, then we surely forget what or, rather who, is at the center of worship.

Please don’t misunderstand, beauty is necessary in our common life of prayer and praise and music must be beautiful. So, be engaged with the music. Listen to it. More than that, allow it to sink down into your heart. Let the music carry you in prayer. Let it assist you in worship. Let it help you worship in beauty and joy. Let the music edify and enhance your act of offering but direct your gaze not toward the musicians but toward the table. Observe the simple gesture of setting the table. Pay attention to what is happening there. What do you see? What do you notice?

Pay attention when the ushers bring come forward with the plates of money and the gifts are received by acolytes.

Pay attention, too, when the Eucharistic Ministers come forward with the gifts of bread and wine received the Presider and Assistant. When they come forward stand. Carrying the central gifts of bread and wine that God will use to feed us with Christ’s very body and blood, this gesture becomes the moment we rise in offering thanks and praise with our bodies as surely, we offer praise with our voices and gifts.

Pay attention because God is speaking through these gestures. Isn’t that the great paradox of Christian worship? The one to whom we bring our offering of worship reaches out to us, speaks to us, touches us.

Touched by God, we are participants in a great mystery, not merely consumers privately getting our needs met, but part of something greater than the solitary self. Contrary to the way the building is shaped, you are not an audience. Together we are the Assembly at worship gathered by God, fed by God, and sent forth into the world by God.

And God receives our offerings.

God receives our offerings and gathers us around this Thanksgiving Table to again make us one.

Now, what we offer may not seem like much – simple gifts of money, bread, wine, music, a simple setting of the table. I mean, what is that in the big scheme of things? Does God really need our offerings? Compared to the needs of all the world, what we offer isn't much.

If you feel that way, you're not alone. The servant who brought the first fruits of his offering to the prophet Elisha wondered about this too. How can 20 barley loaves feed 100 people? Elisha was insistent – “set it before them.” And they ate and there were leftovers.

The disciples of Jesus, too, were skeptical about what they could offer. It was hardly enough. Philip asked, “Where can we buy enough bread to feed all these folks?” It was about 5,000 people in all. Andrew scoffed at the little boy's offering of five loaves and two fish. “What is this among so many people?” Yet, Jesus, trusting in God's abundance, insisted and received the gifts of the loaves and fish, blessed them, broke them and gave them and the people were fed and full! There were even leftovers!

From an offering of a little God provides much.

You see, the real miracle in the feeding of the 5,000 isn't some supernatural spectacle to dazzle or entertain. The real miracle in the story of the loaves and fishes is that it is an instance where God's dream comes true – no one is deprived or left out and all receive the same. There is enough for all.

Each Sunday the miracles of the 5,000; the loaves and fishes – unfolds around this and countless other tables where Christ's body gathers.

Where else but at the Table of Jesus are rich and poor treated alike, and young and old receive the same gifts? Where else but at the table of Jesus are all treated alike and held in God's heart? There's no VIP section or first-class seating. And should the Bishop drop in, he doesn't get a bigger piece of bread than the rest of us.

The miracle is that amid broken systems, failed politics, imperfect economies, and the rule of greed, God continues to enact God's reign of justice.

So, with Elisha and with the little boy offering five loaves and two fish, we offer back to God what God has first given us, trusting that God will use our gifts wisely and well. And along with St. Paul we dare to believe that Christ is “able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine...”

And it is a power at work within us.

Many of you volunteer at “Edible Hope,” the feeding ministry of St. Luke’s Episcopal Church in Ballard, pastored by my wife, Britt. Some days Edible Hope feeds up to 200 people. Much like the Jesus whom they adore and follow, this ministry is both lauded and criticized. Yes, it’s messy. It’s a kind of daily unfolding of the loaves and fish, for no one is denied, all are welcome, and more than that, all are satisfied, loved and respected.

Ask Britt or any of the folks leading Edible Hope and they will tell you that this daily ministry is an extension of the Eucharist shared around the table on Sunday morning.

I think miracles like these, despite the headlines, unfold throughout the world as Christ’s Body continues to enact God’s presence. This is what Eucharistic living looks like.

Over the next several weeks, you’ll be hearing a lot about bread. In John’s Gospel, the feeding of the 5,000 isn’t a story unto itself. Jesus spins it throughout a long chapter to speak of himself as the Bread of Life.

Listen to Jesus over the next weeks and discover again the miracle of the meal celebrated here and how it extends into your life and the shared life and ministry of PRLC.

Our offering goes toward God’s ongoing project of feeding and healing a broken and hungry world.

The bread and wine and money and whatever else we offer are signs pointing to the greater truth – our whole life is an offering to God.

What is that in the grand scheme of things? Well, from a little God provides much. So, with joy and thanksgiving we surrender our lives to the one who is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we all can ask or imagine.” Amen.