

GIFTS FOR THE ALTAR

It is a broken world, but grace abounds. Many of you have been going through trials, but grace abounds. Many people find this church – this faith family – a source of light and Life along the WAY. Others work actively to weaken and divide and discredit all that we do here, but grace abounds. Sometimes we are called to turn and face a challenge or an evil, but most often we are called to face and follow the light and Life of Christ Jesus. We are not in the business of fighting evil, though many think we should be. We are in the business of living the New Life in Christ Jesus. For the most part, we must choose to focus either on one or on the other.

So more and more we find the New Life – the unseen dimensions – in the very midst of whatever is going on in the normal, familiar life all around us. Truly grace abounds, and we find ourselves growing and moving on within our Lord’s love and blessings. Jesus did open a most surprising and wondrous WAY for us. And wonder of wonders, He goes on inviting us into it.

Not apart from that, as some would have it, but as an integral part of this Path and journey, we come to Covenant time. At this time of year we find ourselves asked, ready or not: How much do we care about this faith family? How important is it to us *really*? Is this church a sideshow, or is it part of the Path itself? Covenant time is commitment time. We each walk the Path alone, in one sense. But the Path itself is framed in relationship – our personal bond with Jesus, and from that, our bonds with each other. “*Two or three gathered in my name*” is the formula. (Matthew 18:20) One in His name is never enough, except in imagination or pride. We are a Covenant band, or we are no church. And life is always asking us: How much do you care? What we do not care enough about, we lose. Have you noticed? It is the spiritual counterpart to “survival of the fittest.” The values, purposes, and relationships that straggle behind get cut out and destroyed by the wolves of time, the elements of neglect, or the pressures of competition.

We do not always prioritize as much or as well as we intend to. But when we do not, life takes care of it for us. What is not high enough on our priority list, we lose. You need only check your own personal history for a few quiet moments to realize that this is true. Some of us have lost things we deeply regret because we did not awaken to the peril in time. Some of us have come very close to losing

things we value very highly, and we shudder to think how close we came to losing them. So we reorder our lives to make sure we do not get so blind or careless ever again.

Do we care about this church? We each decide alone, even though our life here is together. And there is no escaping it: the quality of life here is always a composite of our individual faith and devotion. Among many other things, “church” means a pooling of our resources – our faith, our abilities, our awareness, our purposes, our devotion – and yes, our faults, our shortcomings, our animosities, our fears. What do we bring to the altar today? Covenants we write – gifts we see and know. But the unseen gifts are always truer and more important: our gratitude, our devotion, our true spiritual longings, our willingness – how much our souls love Jesus, without pretense or subterfuge.

Often on Stewardship Sunday (Covenant Sunday) we stress the gift of money. That is totally appropriate, though not the focus today. We value money – or rather, money is the value system of our society. If we do not pay tribute to our King, we have no King – we have no intention of playing a significant part in His Kingdom. Often in the past we have spoken of tithing, reminding ourselves that tithing is one of the fundamental spiritual disciplines. It is not a way to raise money; it is an integral part of the WAY of Life we profess. But that is already clear, I suspect, to anyone around here who wants it to be clear.

A few of you pretend that “tithing” is a word that can be used for whatever amount a person decides to give to the church. But principles are not changed by pretending. A tithe, by definition, is ten percent of your spendable income. Nobody has to give what they do not want to give, least of all in this place. In fact, I have often admonished you to *not* give if you are not ready and willing. Pretending with God is a bad idea. Unwilling gifts are a contradiction in terms. Have you ever experienced an unwilling hug or a resentful kiss? In the spiritual Life, we are not allowed to cheat. It backfires every time. So we do not pretend we love Christ and His Kingdom enough to tithe – until we really do love Christ and His Kingdom. On the other hand, what we do not care enough about, we lose. Some of you care deeply. Some of you depend upon the rest of us to care. Though this fellowship is very far from perfect, you will not easily find another church as balanced, personal, intentional, and free as this one. What always comes with freedom?

So along the way, I remind you that pretending to tithe when we give only three or five or eight percent of our spendable income is also a lie. Or more gently put, it is a way to avoid the LIFE we pretend to claim, as well as a way to avoid the blessings that come with it. But today I hope we are thinking bigger than just money. If the only thing we brought to the altar was our money, it would be a very empty life – a very empty religion. If we pay God what we owe and go on our way, that is a very bleak religion indeed. You will think it crude, but I call it clarity: If we pay God what we owe and go on our way, that turns the church into a brothel. Come and get your fix, hope for a blessing, and go out to live your own life your own way. Nothing personal – no strings attached. Much religion across the world is still like that: Leave nothing of yourself behind. Take nothing of Christ with you into the intimacy of where you really live, what you decide, what you do.

I suspect that this is the very issue Paul is thinking about when we step into the twelfth chapter of Romans. *“I appeal to you brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your very selves as a living sacrifice”*

Let’s back up for a moment. At the very center of our chancel is a Cross and an altar. They are there to symbolize what is at the very center of our lives. They are intimately connected, of course. The altar was at the center of every religion in the ancient world. The altar was how people brought gifts to the gods, how people tried to appease the gods, how people hoped to win the gods’ favor and acquire their blessings. But the gifts were not just laid on the altar willy-nilly. They had to be worthy gifts or the gods would not accept them. It might even make them angry if unworthy gifts were offered, and we might reap curses instead of blessings.

That is a world so foreign to our way of thinking we can hardly fathom it. After all, in our time we never get curses, things never go bad, we never reap the consequences of unworthy gifts or actions. God is always totally pleased with us, whether we do things right or worship him or not. That is why today we have peace and prosperity the world over. We no longer have any theological problems. Dream on, if you wish.

This is nevertheless what the liberal church has been trying to teach us for years now. SIN – alienation from God – has no consequences. It is not a very serious problem, certainly not serious enough to require a Savior or a genuine conversion to a very different Way of Life. Faith

does not really matter – any faith will do; one is just about as good as another. The good ol’ buddy in the sky will always forgive us, whether we repent or not – whether we ever change our lives or not. The Bible is hardly worth reading, never mind studying. Prayer is just sort of “quieting” our own mind and is good for the heart rate. And “love your neighbor” is not about seeing others as children of God – as people of eternal worth; it just means having good manners and acting nice to people’s faces, no matter what we say or do afterward, if in fact we think about them ever again. But all are welcome. Into blinking what?!

We were saying that there is for us a powerful and endless connection between the altar and the Cross. It is one of the greatest surprises in all of life. The Cross represents to us the ultimate sacrifice because it was intentional; because it was on purpose; because it was the ultimate statement of love as Jesus maintained His claim to His mission and purpose and identity as our Messiah – doing so in the face of every threat, anger, and cruelty the world could throw at Him. There was no other way to open a New WAY for us. There was no other way for us to see the depth of the real problem between us humans and God. There was no other way for us to comprehend – to realize – how much He cared. So the Cross stands above the altar and reminds us of the most surprising reversal in all human history. The altar always represented how we try to bring gifts to God – and it still does and it always will. But we belong to a religion which claims that God turned the tables one day: God made sacrifice to *us* – God laid his life on the altar for our sakes – to bring us to a LIFE we never knew existed, and to a relationship with him far more intimate and personal and real than we had ever imagined. Apart from that Cross and all that followed, we would not be able to imagine it being possible. If that doesn’t blow our circuits, nothing ever will.

When we come to believe this – begin to trust Jesus for who He is and why He came – life can never look or be the same again. It changes the very warp and woof of all reality, not to mention all the rules. So we sit here calmly, trying to pretend it’s just another Sunday, we’re doing our thing, and it’s time to turn in our Covenants; pretty soon we’ll make up a budget, have our Annual Meeting, and get on with another year – ho hum. But some of us do not think of it this way. Paul certainly did not. His little trip to Damascus drove the Cross-and-altar thing deep into his very soul. *“I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”*

Turnabout is fair play. If you get it, respond to it. And Paul went on to marvelous things: the total break from this world and its ways; the participation in Christ's body here on earth; the rejoicing and hope and service that surround our New Life in Christ's presence. And his Star Wars appeal: Do not go over to the Dark Side! "*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*" (Romans 12:21) But mostly Paul says: "Jesus put His life on the altar for us. Let us put our very lives on the altar for Him." And everywhere we look in the New Testament are reminders of how much Paul really meant this in his own life.

What feels overwhelming (sad and wrong somehow) to me at times – I don't just mean today, but at this season of my life, for whatever reason – is how often we picture our commitment as something negative; as something we know we are supposed to do but do not want to; as some big impossible thing being asked of us that really is not quite fair. Is that how Paul sounds to you? Is that how we really sound to each other?

I suppose the sacrifice imagery itself is partly to blame. We think sacrifice means destruction, instead of something devoted to God – something made sacred; something transformed into its highest and best purpose. It comes, I suppose, from not really believing in the Resurrection. "*He sitteth at the right hand of God.*" (Romans 8:34) If we put money on the altar, which we do every Sunday, is it burned? It certainly dies to our bank accounts. But is it also transformed into resources for the Kingdom? Well, incomplete imagery is not really our only problem, is it?

Whatever you give to the church, does it make you happy? Is it a blessing? It is for me – one of the things that makes life most worth living. I never want to sound like I am trying to talk you into doing something you do not want to do. When I come here, I do not think of myself as talking to the skeptics, the uncertain, the uncommitted. There is a time and place for all such stances, but inside the church is not one of them. Sometimes, beyond the place of doubt and resistance, it all shifts for us into an entirely different dimension: we *want* to do more, *be* more, *serve our Lord more* – and our deepest frustration and sadness are that we cannot do it even better than we seem able to.

Some of you do not relate to our hymns like I do. That is a puzzlement. Are you afraid to let them reach you? Do you have to have

pop stuff, like you get in the outer world, *all* the time? Did you *start out* liking good coffee, or good Scotch, or classical music, or healthy food? We always have to develop a taste for that which is best, for that which has lasting quality. In any case, were you listening at all to the words you were just singing?

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.*

Did somebody *make* Isaac Watts write such a thing? Did he really mean it? Is it just PR? Is it merely a hymn commissioned by some bishop for Stewardship Sunday? You know it is not. It wells up out of his soul, like I hope it wells up out of ours. Our Savior is precious beyond all words to tell it. The LIFE He invites us into is wonderful, and it is better than anything this world has to offer. Giving our own lives to Him and His Kingdom, in whatever way we can find to do that, is the greatest joy and delight we can find in this life.

I know, as you do yourselves, that there are thousands – hundreds of thousands – of people in our own area who have no deep love for Jesus or His church. But I am getting old enough to realize that I am not in charge of them or their lives. But thanks be to God, they are not in charge of mine either. For as long as I am able – for as long as you and God are willing – I will sing and pray and serve and give and care in this faith family. It is the only way I know to also sing and serve and rejoice in the unseen church, which is forever. I do not do it because I have to or because I am supposed to. I do it because it is joy to me. And if it is joy to you also, then we have a true faith family – a real church.

And by the way, other activities, other organizations, and other purposes are not as important in the long run as the Life and purposes of Christ's church. Though many of you will not believe me, I need to mention it simply because it is true. Some of you have not figured this out yet. Our world, for its own reasons, does not make it easy to figure this out. But that which we truly place on God's altar will always outrank all other categories and all other endeavors.

But I do not want to leave it there. What I really want to say is that if we bring any true gifts to the altar, it is because we have discovered what incredible gifts *come* from the altar.