

Rev. Rebecca Schlatter Liberty

Sermon preached at Redeemer Lutheran Church, Bangor, ME

January 18, 2015—2nd Sunday after Epiphany

Texts: 1 Samuel 3:1-20; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; John 1:43-51

Encountering God in the Offering

In your bulletin today you have a very spiffy handout.* It really stands out, doesn't it, in bright yellow? It has some really cool information about our congregation's ministries. Our stewardship team thought you should see what your money does when you give to the church. I enjoyed helping put this together. But there's a part of me that kind of hopes you don't read it.

When we talk about how to be good stewards of all our resources, we usually end up saying that being a good steward means regularly giving a proportion of your income to the church. Usually we talk about this in conjunction with the church budget. So the message ends up sounding like, "You should give your money to the church because the church needs it." When actually, the church's need for your money is not at all the point of Biblical stewardship. There's a lot more in the Bible about the giving than what the gifts are used for. There, it's more like, "Giving an offering to God is a central part of faith and worship." It's about the spiritual practice more than about the results. So this handout about the results of your giving—I'm not sure you should read it.

A stewardship campaign like the one we're in now sounds like it's motivated by, "How do we get more money for the church?" And certainly that's a relevant question. But the more important question is one posed by our bishop in a recent email: "How do we help people grow in their relationship with Jesus through their financial stewardship?" It's a challenging question, how your decisions about money relate to your following Jesus. And it may even be a helpful question.

But my guess is that it's not what brought you to church today. You didn't arrive this morning saying, "How do I grow in my relationship with Jesus through my financial stewardship? Wow, I really hope that's what today's sermon is about." I would bet that what brought you to church was more about...encountering God (though you might use different words). That's the question of the Epiphany season too: Where and how is God manifested?

The Epiphany answer is: Jesus. In today's gospel Jesus offers a strange image for that manifestation: "you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man," which is one of the titles for Jesus. It sounds weird at first: how do angels ascend and descend on a person? It makes more sense when you know the story Jesus refers to from Genesis. Jacob was traveling and stopped to rest. He slept on the ground and had a dream: There was a ladder, or stairway, or ramp, between heaven and earth, and angels were ascending and descending upon it. God came to him in the

**This document is included at the end of the sermon.*

dream and promised to bless him with land and offspring. Which was no small thing, given that Jacob was a young man who had just run away from home. Genesis says, “Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!’¹⁷ And he was afraid, and said, ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.’”

So when Jesus refers to angels ascending and descending, his Jewish hearers would have recognized Jacob’s dream right away. But now *Jesus* stands in for the ladder. He is now the place where people encounter God. He is the gate of heaven, so to speak. No wonder Nathanael was amazed: God loves us passionately, knows us thoroughly, and wants desperately to be close to us. Through Jesus, the most high God is accessible on earth. When people encounter Jesus—as we do in Word and Sacrament when we worship, and as we gather with the body of Christ—we meet God.

That’s how Lutherans understand worship theologically. It’s okay if you don’t always “feel” it, or only feel it in certain aspects. For some people the high point of worship is communion. For others it’s the insights or reassurance in God’s Word. For some it’s the music, and for others it’s the connection with other members of the body. Those are all fine ways to encounter God, whether or not there are angels ascending and descending. But here’s how Lutheran seminary professor Mark Allan Powell describes what he sees as the “high point of the liturgy”: “We come to church to worship God and at no other point in the service are we provided with so pure an opportunity for worship as this.” What point is he talking about? The offering!

Other than Powell in his book *Giving to God*, I have never heard anyone name “the offering” as the place they most reliably encounter God. In the churches where I grew up and in the places I’ve served before as pastor, the offering was mainly the time to pass the plate, a break in the intensity between the peace and communion, a time even to continue exchanging greetings with the person sitting next to you. It wasn’t an offering so much as it was a collection. It was the church’s method for getting the money they needed.

Powell sees it differently, of course. “The offering is an act of worship, an instance in which we are invited to give up something that we value—our money—as a sacrifice to God. In many ways, it is the high point of the liturgy. We come to church to worship God and at no other point in the service are we provided with so pure an opportunity for worship as this.”

Nope, that’s not the offering I experienced growing up. But it’s the root of why it’s part of worship in the first place. Powell writes,

Picture yourself in ancient Israel, in the early years before there was a temple. The community gathers to worship around some rudimentary altar and each person brings an offering to God. Some have ‘drink offerings’ that they pour out on the altar until the liquid is gone. Others have grain offerings, sheaves of wheat that they place on the altar and light on fire. A few may even bring birds or small animals, which are killed, and, like the wheat, consumed in the flames. What is the point? Well, as any Old Testament commentary will tell you, the thinking that justified such sacrificial

rites could be varied and complex. But the basic point seems to have been this: worshipers brought things that they valued to the altar and left them there. They gave them up; they gave them away. The liquid was poured out, the animals were slaughtered, the grain was incinerated. People gave offerings to God and those offerings were simply destroyed...

As a sidenote, remember our first reading about Samuel and Eli, and how Samuel gave Eli the word that his family would be destroyed because of his sons' "blasphemy" and "iniquity"? You know what their problem was? Disrespecting the offerings people made to God. Taking some of those offerings for themselves. Offering was definitely serious business. Powell continues,

The grain, the animals, even the drink offerings...these were the ancient equivalents of money. The Israelites found it worthwhile, indeed necessary, to give away their possessions in sacrificial acts of worship to God. The point was not what happened to grain after it was placed on the altar; the point was simply putting that grain on the altar in the first place.

I sometimes imagine someone in Israel saying, after a time, 'You know, it is kind of a waste to just put this grain on the altar and burn it up. Maybe we could give it to the poor instead. Or maybe we could give it to the priests and let it be their salary.' Such suggestions have obvious merit, but the problem comes when, over time, people begin to forget the real reason for making these offerings. They begin to think, 'God wants me to give up some of my grain so that the poor can be fed or the priests can be paid.' That had not been the original idea. The primary purpose of sacrifice is worship.

So, as a spiritual practice, financial stewardship and the sacrifice of what we value to God, go *way* back, way before Jesus came on the scene. This spiritual practice has been "worthwhile" and even "necessary" for humans for a long time. But the problem with preaching about a spiritual practice is that it can end up sounding like law—"This is what we should do"—rather than the gospel of what God has done for us. But really, the hope with all spiritual practices is that we *practice* receiving God's gifts and letting them transform us. So what really happens in the practice of offering something we value to God? Could we see it as something we *get to* do, and not just something we *should* do? Could we ever see it as the high point of worship, a place we encounter God?

Maybe the key is in that phrase Powell used: "something we value." We all have different things we value—not only money, but also possessions, time, knowledge, experience, skills, relationships. While we have worked hard for many of those things, ultimately they are all gifts—including the opportunity and ability to work hard for them! We ourselves, our whole lives, our existence at this moment on this planet, are gifts. Valuable gifts. It's like Psalm 139 says: We are fearfully and wonderfully made. We are created, loved, known, and valued by God. When we return to God a portion of those gifts that we value, we practice a couple things. Gratitude for the gifts, certainly. Generosity that is a mirror image of God's generosity in giving them in the first place. Those are pretty great things to practice—being

grateful and generous. Even more than that, we also remember how much *God values us as gifts*. We matter to God. Who we are and what we give, no matter how much or in what form, matter to God.

I hope you get that message not only from this stewardship campaign, not only from our bulletin board with all the hands on it doing God's work, but from *everything* we practice. You matter. You matter to God, and you matter to us. Your presence in this community matters, whether or not you contribute anything at all. And your participation matters, and your gifts, whatever they are and however you give them.

That's really what this bright yellow bulletin handout is trying to say: Here's what we can do because we're doing it together and because you're a part of it, and it matters to us and to others. It's not just what we *should* do; it's what we have the *privilege* of doing. We who are fearfully and wonderfully made are invited to share who we are and what we have. In that sharing we know that who we are and what we have has tremendous value. In that offering, maybe we will even grow in our relationships with Jesus through our financial stewardship.

One last thought: Next week you'll be invited to give your financial gifts in other ways besides the offering plate. (You don't have to change, but now you'll have more options.) You'll be able to set up regular gifts from your bank account, for example. (I've found this to be a great option which helps me carry out my good intentions even when I get distracted.) This might change things for the offering plate. What do you "offer" in worship if you're giving your money in a different way? Given everything we've been talking about, it seems right to take the emphasis off passing the plate as a method of collection—since we might not even need it for collection as much anymore. But that doesn't mean we don't need to have a time for offering. If the offering is the "high point of the liturgy," let's think together about this, and renew our understanding of the offering in worship as a place we encounter God.

For now, hold Psalm 139 in your heart and know that it's talking about you. Pass the offering plate and give thanks that God values and eagerly receives what all of us have to give. Come to the supper, and receive the love poured out by the One who offered himself for us, that we might live as God's gifts to one another and to the world.

Sermon Hymn: ELW 695, As Saints of Old

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WHAT YOUR FINANCIAL GIFTS SUPPORT AT REDEEMER

Our church budget allocates financial resources to various ministries, but traditional budget categories don't tell the clearest story of what your gifts support. Here's another way to read this year's budget, according to the five core purposes that emerged from our 2013 cottage meetings. (Expenses such as personnel and property are divided according to the estimated proportion spent in each category.)

1. Experiencing the sacred

Worship in Word and Sacrament is at the core of who we are, and we experience the sacred together at other times too. Your gifts pay for:

- Direct worship expenses, such as altar and music supplies
- Pastoral leadership in worship and preaching
- Staff time and supplies for coordination and materials
- Building maintenance and utilities

\$74,900 per year (36% of the total budget)

2. Following the radical way of Jesus

3. Living the questions

These categories are especially difficult to quantify, as they speak to the way we live every day and not just at church. However, those ways of living are enriched and inspired by our practices together. Your gifts support:

- Pastoral teaching and mentoring; educational materials
- Social ministries
- Building upkeep that facilitates our hospitality (i.e. serving meals, hosting outside groups)
- Connection to other churches (i.e. participation in synod events)

\$36,900 (17% of the total budget)

4. Being nurtured in community

While community is especially nurtured by time and talents, there are also expenses, such as:

- Supplies for fellowship, education, and youth
- Pastoral care (almost half the pastors' time is in this category)
- Property costs of our place to gather
- Communications which help keep our community connected

\$59,000 (28% of the total budget)

5. Extending the hand of love

Just as many individuals give a proportion of their income to the congregation, the congregation gives 10% of our income to communities beyond ourselves. Through your gifts, we participate in ministries reaching into the wider community.

- Benevolence to the New England Synod, ELCA, and local groups
- Service to people in need
- Coordination and communication related to outreach ministries

\$39,700 (19% of the total budget)

Total 2014-15 budget: \$210,500

The reach of Redeemer's ministries isn't fully accounted for here. Many things are funded outside the church budget, including the many "in-kind" gifts of food, time, and other contributions.

Thank you for all the ways in which you are making a difference through this church!