

Our Offerings

Micah 6:1-8, II Corinthians 9:6-11

November 13, 2022 Dedication of pledges and Thanksgiving food donations

Rev. Cynthia Cochran-Carney, First Presbyterian Church of San Rafael, CA

With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Micah 6:1-8 NRSV

Remember: A stingy planter gets a stingy crop; a lavish planter gets a lavish crop. I want each of you to take plenty of time to think it over, and make up your own mind what you will give. That will protect you against sob stories and arm-twisting. God loves it when the giver delights in the giving.

God can pour on the blessings in astonishing ways so that you're ready for anything and everything, more than just ready to do what needs to be done. As one psalmist puts it, God throws caution to the winds, giving to the needy in reckless abandon. This right-living, right-giving ways never run out, never wear out. This most generous God who gives seed to the farmer that becomes bread for your meals is more than extravagant with you. God gives you something you can then give away, which grows into full-formed lives, robust in God, wealthy in every way, so that you can be generous in every way, producing with us great praise to God.

II Corinthians 9:6-11 The Message

Bring an offering to church. What does that mean to you? It may depend on your life experiences.

When Jeffrey and I started a new church in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania, Kwame and his mother became active soon after we started. Kwazi was from Ghana and was a faithful Christian who had been raised Presbyterian. As we began to meet with new people interested in the new church and talked about worship, we talked about the Sunday offering. Where could we purchase offering plates or baskets? What about envelopes? What will happen in worship when we say it is time for the offering? At one point in the discussion, Kwazi said, "Maybe we should do what we do back home in Ghana. Invite people to come forward dancing and place their offering in the large basket."

My memory is that we all loved the idea, but were not sure we could pull it off. I know I am too limited in my thinking. Clearly for Kwazi's church, there was joy in bringing an offering

forward. It was part of the response to good news, to God's love and grace, to being with others who embodied this love and grace.

Offering. You see that word every week in the bulletin and on the slide. We expand the meaning a bit on Sundays like today. In our church, a community of faith seeking to deepen our connection to the Holy One and follow the ways of Jesus, you are regularly invited to bring who you are and something you have as an offering – food for the food basket and today for the Thanksgiving bags. An offering of money. We don't pass the plates anymore, but you are invited to give – basket, online, in the mail, QR code. And today we dedicate the offering of pledges, of plans for giving in 2023.

Giving an offering. Bringing an offering. Why? What does it mean? This theme is central to the biblical narrative. The word "offering" occurs over 500 times in the Bible – Hebrew and Greek. There are an amazing number of types of offerings to God, the Holy One, Yahweh. An elaborate system of rules and rituals around offerings in Leviticus – grain offerings, drink offerings, sin offerings for atonement, burnt offerings, and more. Offerings to honor God, to seek forgiveness, to praise God. There were offerings related to the first fruits of the harvest, thanking God for the harvest, for the land, for the food to be eaten to sustain life.

What does the word mean for you? Offering.

We may bring an offering of food or a meal or money or time or presence.

We may bring out of gratitude or guilt or joy.

Maybe we can begin to see that offerings become part of the rhythm of our life together. We give and share, we receive and give. We deepen our sense of gratitude to God as we experience both of joy of giving and receiving. Offerings to God are woven together with sharing in community.

Celtic Communities

When Jeffrey and I were traveling, we visited the sites of many monasteries in Ireland and Scotland. Celtic spirituality has a deep sense of the mystery and presence of the holy and sacred in everything and everyone. The lives of St. Bridget and St. Kevin were two of renowned leaders of Celtic communities that embodied this shared life in community. They believed people must practice contemplation and stillness to see the beauty of God in all of creation and to stop and listen to the needs of others. We visited Glendalough, the community that was built around St. Kevin.

Early Celtic Christians shared their food, money, work, play and worship in communities which were always open to the people who lived around them. Wherever they lived, they saw Christ in their neighbor. They also felt a responsibility to offer travelers a safe and hospitable place to rest. They believed the more you gave a visitor then the more you received in return.

The Celts in these monastic communities believed in a system whereby you are expected to give – receive and reciprocate. It was woven into the fabric of life in community. You offer who you are – your gifts and skills – and what you have.

The Celtic Christians often worshipped out of doors and gathered around high crosses and holy wells. Since the Celts were a farming people and dependent on the changing seasons for their survival and livelihood, the natural world was both a presence and a companion. I am still researching how they marked the harvest and if they had specific offerings to God .

In different cultures and in different churches, there is a variety of ways an offering is given and what it means. A friend of mine, Bill Carter, who is a Presbyterian pastor in Clarks Summit, PA, tells a story about one of his experiences.

We were a group of college students on a weekend retreat near Syracuse, NY. Most of us had lived sheltered, white skinned lives, so our chaplain said he wanted to expand our perspective on Christianity.

Well, this did it. He took us to a Pentecostal Temple in a tough neighborhood. There were people clapping their hands, stomping their feet, and speaking in tongues. Clearly they weren't Presbyterians....After a very long sermon, the preacher had taken the offering plates and handed them to the ushers. While the band struck up a song and Sister Louella banged a tambourine, the ushers came around and held out the plates for us to put something in. I put in a couple of dollars and my usher stood there and looked at me. He didn't move. So I pulled out another dollar or two and put it in. He looked at the money, looked up at me, shook his head, and moved on. It was disconcerting.

As the band and Sister Louella whipped the small crowd into a frenzy, the ushers danced to the front with their offering plates. The preacher called the music to a halt and said, "Praise God!" Then he took the offering plates, looked down and said, "There's not enough here!" With that, the band started up again, same song but louder. Sister Louella is banging that tambourine.

And when the ushers circled back and danced back up the aisle, this time led by Sister Louella with her tambourine, the preacher took back the plates. This time, before he exclaimed "Praise God," he actually looked down to see what they had gathered. Then he lifted his eyes toward heaven and prayed, "Holy God, we hope this is enough for you. We pray that nobody is holding back from the Lord. And we know . . . and we know . . . and we know . . ." He paused awkwardly. He seemed to have lost his groove. It was still for a moment.

Then he blurted it out, "We know that you want so much more from us than our money." (1)

That is the message from Micah. He's from the village of Moresheth, about twenty miles outside of Jerusalem. And he sees quite clearly what money is doing to people. Micah sees

how those who have fields want more fields, so they seize them from the people who live there. They do whatever wickedness they can. Meanwhile, the rulers of the country are confused by lies or tainted by bribes. They are so intoxicated by power that they can't tell the difference between right and wrong (3:1-8). All the while they are supported by the well-paid priests and clerics, the ones who live in luxury and look the other way.

Micah speaks the truth by asking questions prompted by the Holy One – Do you think God wants a big offering of hundreds of rams? Wouldn't God be pleased with a big offering? The question is met with silence. Because God wants so much more than our money. God wants lives that do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with the Lord.

Justice is something we do, not something we talk about. In the Bible, justice is acting like a neighbor, a good neighbor, a fair neighbor. It's working for the benefit of the people around us. And making sure people have food to eat at Thanksgiving and all year.

Kindness is something for us to love. It's the word "hesed," which means "loving-kindness." It's a word of affection and loyalty, a dedication to build human relationships, and not to trample on them. We choose kindness in the ways we care for one another and our neighbors.

And walking humbly with our God: that's the alternative to walking arrogantly by ourselves. The only way to walk with God is "humbly," for God is greater than we presume ourselves to be. Walking humbly is to have a right perception of ourselves: able to walk, and therefore equipped, but doing so humbly, so that we are not intoxicated by a sense of ourselves.

This is what God requires of us.

When President Jimmy Carter took the oath of office at the beginning of his term, he put his hand on a Bible that his mother had given him opened to these words. And in his elegant and hopeful inaugural address, he declared, "I join in the hope that when my time as your president is ended, people might say this about our nation: that we had remembered the words of Micah and renewed our search for humility, mercy, and justice."

President Carter understood these words as a benchmark for our lives. They capture the essence of what makes a good Jew, and therefore what makes a good Christian. They capture the essence of what it means to be a good human being. To do justice, to love kindness, to walk humbly with God. That's what God requires. Our offerings today do matter. Giving and sharing shape us. And our offering is so much more than money. Amen.

1) Rev. Bill Carter, "If the Offering Is Not Enough," Jan. 29, 2017

<https://billcartersermons.blogspot.com/2017/01/if-offering-is-not-enough.html>