

What Is Your Offering?

April 7, 2019

Thomas Long, the Presbyterian preacher that I've heard on several occasions, headlined at least two Moravian clergy retreats that I attended, told the story of a minister who one Sunday at the time of the offering received the plates with the offerings from the ushers. And he held them up to the heavens, and he offered this prayer of dedication: "Oh Lord, despite what we say, this is what we really think of you."

What is our offering to God? Does it, whether it be money or time or talent, does it reflect what we really think of God? I don't know if Union uses an every member visitation every fall in preparation for the budget for the coming year. It used to be a practice that several Moravian churches employed so that they knew how to set the budget for years to come, but fewer and fewer do it now. At any rate, a couple of the churches that I have served over the years withhold to such a practice, and it was a practice that proved many times so very beneficial for them. The key was to have an important training session for the visitors and to have those visitors who themselves had been visited usually by a team composed of the pastor and the chair of the campaign who in turn had done visits on each other. And in some cases, the pastor – actually more cases than I care to remember – the pastor would also have to make several visits because it was difficult to garner enough volunteers from among the membership.

But many years ago, such a scenario played out for me in one of the congregations that I was serving. And, as I think you know, the main job was to go out on Stewardship Sunday with a handful of pledge cards and call on the members seeking a financial pledge from them as you visited at their home, a pledge for the coming year. This turned out, to my surprise, not to be a chore, but a fascinating and eye-opening experience many times. The act of being asked for money evokes from people their true feelings about the church and their faith. The joyful rejoiced, the self-centered resisted, the unhappy complained.

I can remember two visits that I made back to back. One was to a man who himself was, I think, a partner, or at least fairly high up in the organization of his business. He was fairly well known to be a prime contributor to the United Way. This will be a piece of cake, I thought. This guy knows the meaning of charitable giving, and he will respond with the same generosity he counts on in his own work.

To my surprise and even astonishment, though, he would not even let me into the house when I arrived. I had called ahead to announce that I would be coming and to tell him what the purpose was, and he opened the front door about an inch, begrudgingly took the pledge card through the crack, scribbled a pittance on it as I stood and waited, and shoved it back pulling the door closed with a kind of a crisp and final snap.

The next visit – that really unearthed me – but the next visit was to an elderly lady who was getting by on a fixed income and she lived in a modestly furnished apartment. And when I told her why I was there and that this wasn't just the pastoral call like I had made to her home a couple of times before, she said she was pleased to see me, invited me in for a chat during which she indicated her appreciation for all that the church had done to her and for her. When the time came to pass the pledge card to talk about the budget of the church, she took it from my hand with joy and she increased her pledge which I knew really meant a sacrifice for her.

How do we account for such generosity and devotion or lack of it? Well, in our story when Jesus was at dinner with his disciples and some of his friends that night in Bethany, there was a dramatic and profound act of devotion. But just as was the case for me on those stewardship visits, it came from an unexpected source. It didn't come from Peter, or James, or John. Certainly didn't come from Judas who loudly protested that this kind of extravagance, this kind of act was extravagance when it occurred. It didn't even come from Lazarus whose presence at the dinner party was possible only because Jesus had raised him from the dead. It came instead from Mary who took that bottle of very expensive perfume, poured it on Jesus' feet and then wiped his feet with her hair.

How do we account for such generosity and devotion? Part of the generosity and devotion is discernment. Those who pour out adoration toward God and those who have a discerning sense of what is truly at stake, what is really happening in life, are generous and devoted people. Check the lobby of any large hospital in the morning and you'll hear the voices of the patients being discharged. Some speak out almost in rage: "I'm going to be on crutches for a blankety-blank month. I have to take six of these stupid pills every day." And then there are others who are singing gratitude and praise: "Thank God for the blessings of help." All of these patients are going home, but only some of them have the discernment to be thankful.

In our story from John, the room was full of people but only Mary discerned the presence of Jesus in a way that showed gratitude. But the issue is more than just discernment. Mary was not blowing up helium balloons to celebrate her discernment of Jesus' presence. She wasn't lighting candles on a cake out of gratitude for her discernment of what Jesus meant to her. By pouring on him this costly ointment she was anointing Jesus for death. We often miss that point as we tell this story from John. It wasn't, as I've heard some folks preach, just to provide a gesture of how much she loved Jesus. Some have even extrapolated that it was a sensuous kind of love. It wasn't, as I've heard from others, a way of condemning Judas for his miserliness. It wasn't to give some kind of theological understanding to Jesus having previously raised Lazarus from the dead.

No instead: "Leave her alone," Jesus said. "She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial." Mary's costly gift of gratitude grew out of an awareness of the cost of Jesus' life and gift of sacrifice of his own life. One New Testament scholar wrote in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, "She gives boldly of herself in love to Jesus at this hour just as Jesus will boldly give of himself in love at his hour. The vision of a community shaped by love and grounded in relationship to Jesus is first enacted by a female disciple who has no claim to that position."

Maybe that's the key. Those who recognize the cost of kindness and redemption are those who love most freely and most generously. It should come as no surprise, then, that self-sufficient executives shove pledge cards through door jambs like tips to bell hops, while widows, who can barely afford to feed themselves, joyously pour out the costly ointment.

When I served the Downey California congregation, I, of course, lived in the parsonage that was next door to the church. I'm not sure how it is in the United Church of Christ anymore, but even though more and more congregations provide a housing allowance so that pastors might be able to buy their own homes, a majority of Moravian churches still expect their pastor to live in the parsonage most often located right next door to the church.

Well, anyway, during my time there, several AA and NA groups would use our facilities for their weekly meetings. They were never charged a fee, but all were expected to contribute toward the heating and the lighting expenses. And periodically there'd be a knock on the parsonage door after one of their meetings. It would be a member of one of those groups who would bring over an envelope with the rental money collected from the group that night. The groups were significantly different from each other however. Even though there were no rules regarding how or who should be in what group, the groups were different. The members would usually filter themselves into like-minded homogeneous groups. One of the groups seemed to be made up of professional-type folks: teachers, doctors, attorneys, etc. Another would be made up mainly of blue-collar workers: truckers, factory workers, etc. And the third would attract the down-and-outers: fast food workers, part-timers, unemployed, even some homeless folks.

Many of the members of this last AA group had very difficult lives. Some had lost jobs. Some had lost their families. Some had lost contact with their families. But like all the rest in the group, the members struggled with addiction and so did all the members of the other groups. None of the members in this group were wealthy by any means and they passed the hat for rent, tossing in coins and one dollar bills until they could scrape together enough that they thought would be sufficient for the church.

One Thursday night 'round Thanksgiving time, if I remember correctly, there was the usual knock on the door. And when I went to the door, there was a member of that third AA group holding an envelope. And the man handed it to me and he said there's a little extra in there this time. And sure enough, the envelope was crammed with wrinkled bills and an assortment of coins almost double the usual amount. And a note was enclosed with the money: "With thanksgiving to God and to the church for all the blessings we have received." When I reported that encounter to the board at the next meeting, someone said the envelope was fragrant with costly perfume. Wonderful offering.

How do we offer costly perfume to God? What do we contribute to living as disciples? How do we bring hope into hopeless situations, joy into joyless work, love into hate-filled encounters, reason into unreasonable demands, peace into violent confrontations, dialogue into one-way communications? Those are questions that come to my mind in studying this event in the life of our Lord. Goodness knows we live in a time – and perhaps every age has known of it – a time when division is exalted, when cruelty is cheered, when callousness seems to be the standard, when racism is unashamedly declared, when arrogance is champion. It is a time like this when we who claim to be the kin of Christ ought to be asking those questions of ourselves. Let me repeat them again. How do we bring hope into hopeless situations, joy into joyless work, love into hate-filled encounters, reason into unreasonable demands, peace into violent confrontations, dialogue into one-way communications? What is our offering? Does it reflect what we really think of God? How do we serve the risen savior? How will we go about serving that savior in the week ahead? Amen.

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