

Pentecost 18, Proper 20
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

September 18, 2016
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The Great Offering

A month ago the scandal over the Epi-pen burst upon us, naming a growing angst about pharmaceutical companies' relationship with regulators, and sparking fears of another melt-down like with the banking industry in 2008. Free market enterprise which goes to the heart of our country's society has a hard time naming the sin here. After all, we're supposed to be able to do what it takes to turn a buck, right? What is wrong with making something and then maneuvering to get an advantage over one's competitors for its sale?

Even Adam Smith, the "Father of Capitalism," who was at best an agnostic, believed that unregulated capitalism would inherently become abusive. He believed that the Churches were supposed to apply the necessary moral restraint to keep this kind of thing from happening. He did not anticipate the degree to which secularization would strip the churches of such a role. But on a deeper level there is an echo of the first lesson today. Epi-pens save lives. Lives are sacred, holy gifts from God. Epi-pens cost money. When you charge what the market will sustain rather than what makes a simple honest living to make something that saves sacred lives you put a price on the holy. Heather Bresch's hike of the price of the Epi-pen 400% means that she is gouging the cost of someone else's life-threatening crisis. When Peter Atwater's article in the September 1 issue of Time Magazine quotes her as saying, "I legislated," he rightly points out the incestuous relationship between producers and regulators that allows her to get away with it. It parallels Martin Shkreli's actions as CEO of Turing Pharmaceuticals when he hiked the price of an AIDS drug 5456% overnight.¹ Free market enterprise only works when it is not the final arbiter of human ethics. There must be a higher voice. There must be a surrender to something—the Christian would say, "Someone" whose moral standards rise above the selfish motivations of a free market society.

One theme that has surfaced over and over again in the structure of our worship is that concept of surrender. We begin our worship with it in the beginning acclamation and collect for purity. We hear about it in the readings and we express it when we say the Creed. It is especially poignant in the confession, and it's implicit in the Peace. Now we turn to it one more time. The Offertory is a hinge between the two Acts of the 2-act drama which is our worship. It stands between and links the Service of the Word, the first half, and the Service of the Table, the second half. It is a profound statement of surrender to the will of a loving, self-giving God.

¹ <http://time.com/4475626/epipen-price-pharmaceutical-crisis/>

We begin it with the Offertory Sentence. After the Holy Hallelujah of the Peace has died down a bit the presider stands up front and says something that has to do with offering. There is a list of suggested offertory sentences on p. 376-377.

- *Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and make good your vows to the Most High. Psalm 50: 14*
- *Ascribe to the Lord the honor due his Name; bring offering and come into his courts. Psalm 96: 8*
- *Walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself for us, an offering and sacrifice to God. Ephesians 5: 2*
- *I appeal to you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present yourselves as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Romans 12: 1*
- *If you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Matthew 5: 23, 24*
- *Through Christ let us continually offer to God the sacrifice of praise, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his Name. But do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. Hebrews 13: 14, 15*
- *Lord our God, you are worthy to receive glory and honor and power; because you have created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being. Revelation 4: 11*
- *Yours, O Lord, is the greatness, the power, the glory, the victor, and the majesty. For everything in heaven and on earth is yours. Yours, O Lord, is the kingdom, and you are exalted as head over all. 1 Chronicles 19: 11*
- *Or this bidding: Let us with gladness present the offerings and oblations of our life and labor to the Lord.*

My favorite is the 3rd one, "Walk in love as Christ loved us,..." How has Christ loved us? He laid down his life for us on the Cross. It is an act of surrender to the good of the other, the good of the whole. To live the love of God is our motto here at Good Shepherd. It just seems to fit.

Every one of the offertory sentences, except for the last one, is taken from Scripture, the primary leg of the 3-legged Anglican Stool, and calls for some kind of surrender. This is entirely as it should be. The community of the faithful those who seek to pattern their lives and their believing after Christ as the Church has received such living and believing, live a life that is radically different from the life outside these walls. Outside, the selfish dynamic of the secular world drives us to seek first our own glory lest our own living be ripped out from under our feet. Here, on the other hand, we learn to give, to love and to surrender to a God of love, and we learn to pray for the world that another way of living might find a foothold in an otherwise violently self-centered way of life.

We do it in words, yes, and we do it in action—not just symbolic action, but practical action. We give of our substance. We give bread and wine, and we give money.

Now, I've done the little talk with most of you about where the bread and wine come from, how in the production of these symbols the whole of our social and economic world is caught up and placed on the altar, from earth to farmer to trucker to mill to store to church to you, and from vineyard to press to winery to transport truck to store to church to you. In the bread and the wine we place our whole socio-economic world on the Altar as first fruits of our world.

But we place more than that on the altar. Notice that we started with the earth. Wheat and grapes grow in the soil. They depend on the weather. The weather is a system that wraps its arms around the whole planet. The famous butterfly effect means that what happens here affects what happens there. We place on the altar the whole of creation.

We hold, as Christians, that creation comes from God, and we come from God, and our powers to earn money and to live come from God. How, then, do we offer back to God that which is in the final analysis God's? If we go back to the story of Adam and Eve in the garden we see that the whole of creation is entrusted to humanity as to a steward. Stewards manage what is not their own. We offer back to God our management of creation as a reminder that all of creation begins and ends in the mind of God.

Let's go back to what we put in the plates. It is a tithe in the biblical sense. A tithe mathematically is 10%. Spiritually a tithe is a representation of the whole. In one sense, the point is not the percentage, it is the symbol: I give to God a part as a way of remembering that ALL of it is God's. In another it is the point: 10% is enough to be significant.

I have taken to making a statement at the offering up of the peoples' tithes and offerings. It is not in the Prayer Book or in the Bible, but it expresses that central idea of the relationship of surrender: "With all that we are and all that we have, we honor you, our source and our end." The offertory is not merely paying up our fair share of a religious tax to run the church. If it were so the Church would be a club like Rotary or Lions Clubs. No, it is a spiritual discipline of radical surrender.

The word "investment" has been used recently by religious fundraising efforts. The idea is that you invest in the Kingdom and reap heavenly returns. It is a good word, but like everything else that gets appropriated from the secular world into the world of the Church it needs some tweaking. When I make an investment in the financial world I

take my own assets and I entrust them to another to make them grow. I expect that person to manage my assets in a way that benefits my financial goals in life. If not, I will find another investment into which to put my money. When we think about investment in the Church however, it takes on another layer. We are not the owners of the assets we hold in our bank accounts. God is the owner, and they have been entrusted to us. We, in our turn, invest them in a way that benefits the Kingdom. The majority of them, we invest in our own wellbeing. Some, however, are to be invested in a larger context, either internally in the Body of Christ, the Church, or externally, in actions and programs that extend the Kingdom of God's rule of love in the world. The divine guideline for what part to invest outside our own wellbeing is the tithe.

Some say, "I give to what I can in good conscience support." This is a valid way of thinking—with one caveat. Make sure your conscience is listening to the Spirit in humility and openness, lest one's gift to the church become a power-play instead of a cheerful gift. Like the Creed and the Pledge from a previous sermon, sometimes a gift to something one does not fully appreciate is an important act of generosity. After all, God makes rain to fall on the just and the unjust. In the end the Church will still be here when you and I are gone. At that point we have no control over how our legacy is used. What counts most is the heart of the giver at the time of the gift.

Now, the flip side of all of this is the effect. It is a healthy personal discipline. My experience with 10% is that when I can live on 90% of my income I find that I am satisfied. The voluntary discipline of sacrifice puts me in the mode of living with less, rather than constantly pushing my income to its limits for my own consumptive sake. It turns our economics on its ear. When Karisse and I give our tithe (and we do tithe) off the top we always end the month OK. When we delay for fear we might not make all of our expenses we always end up short! Adam Smith had part of the answer, but he missed the essential piece. You go figure it out!

In the end it is WE who place OURSELVES on the altar. The struggle has been aptly described by the one who said that the problem with a living sacrifice is that it keeps crawling off the altar! Nonetheless, that impossible thing is what we seek to do. This is an essential idea that I want you to file away for the next sermons, for it is central to our understanding of the Sacrament of the Table. It is pivotal to how we eat the sacred meal together.

The essential act of the offertory is an opening of the hands and the heart. We return to the theme of the beginning of the whole worship experience, and we lay the groundwork for the second Act. Next week we will begin to unpack that one.