



## GROWING TOWARD GOD IN WORSHIP:

### THE OFFERINGS AND PRAYER

1 Timothy 2:1-5; Romans 12:1-5

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The offering may have the most unrealized potential out of all our acts of worship. So much of it has become about money. We think it is simply a time to pass the plate; that the music is there to occupy our minds while we wait. But this could not be further from the truth.

Originally, the time of offering was an act of atonement. "Aaron shall offer the bull as a sin offering for himself, and shall make atonement for himself and for his house." (Leviticus 16:6) Since we are on the other side of the Resurrection, this is no longer needed. As Hebrews explains, "... But as it is, [Jesus] has appeared once for all ... to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself." (Hebrews 9:26)

No longer being a time for expiation of sins, the offering is freed to be a time for us to offer, join, and grow.

**OFFER** yourself in thanksgiving for Christ's self-offering.

**JOIN** in God's work in the world.

**GROW** your faith through generosity.

Offering is not just a time to balance the budget but your way of devoting all that you are to God. It is born out of a hearing of the Word, which leads to a thankful, generous response which, in turn, grows your faith.

#### **OFFER**

In Romans, Paul challenges us to give all that we are to God, "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." (Romans 12:1) This means pledging our life to God in thanksgiving.

Think about Hannah's dedication of Samuel. She was without children. Deeply distressed, she prayed, "O Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not

forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you ..." (1 Samuel 1:11) God blessed her with Samuel. In turn, she dedicated him to the temple saying, "... as long as he lives, he is given to the Lord." (1 Samuel 1:28b) She dedicated her deepest treasure, Samuel, to the Lord out of thanksgiving to God. We dedicate all that we are out of joy for Christ's sacrifice of love.

Samuel literally grew up in God's house. This is not option at First Presbyterian; we don't have enough beds to fit everyone. To present our bodies as a living sacrifice to God during the offering time, we examine our heart, our minds, and our checkbooks to see if there is any part of our life that we are holding back from God.

This is one of the powers of giving your finances in church. There are some days for me it is easy to write the check and even add more to it. There are other days when, truthfully, it is a struggle. On those days, when I examine my heart it always discloses fear and lack of trust, some part of me that I have failed to give over to God. This means extra prayer work for the week ahead because Scripture teaches us that giving breeds blessing.

#### **JOIN**

The time of thanksgiving in offering is also a moment to join in the work of the Lord. Out of exultant joy for all God has done, we have the enthusiasm of the redeemed to enable others to experience the abundance of Christ's love.

Like Isaiah responding to God's question "Whom shall I send?", during the offering we exuberantly declare in our hearts, "Here I am, send me!"

Because the offering is a time to offer yourselves, we have placed the Call to Discipleship at this point in the service. Because after having received God's grace in confession, shared Christ's

love in the Passing of the Peace, and heard God's truth in Proclamation, we are primed for service in His name.

During the offering, as you are listening to the music, spend time considering specifically how you might be of service to the Lord. For instance, during the time of the Coronavirus, your silent prayer at the offering may go something like this:

*Lord I offer my service to you.  
I know there are many needs in this crisis.  
I offer my time, my will, my strength.  
Show me what you would have me do,  
to help all those in need.  
Swell my heart with compassion;  
open my eyes to action;  
increase the generosity of my spirit  
in service to your glory.  
Use me as a vessel of your love  
to spread hope and joy.*

### **GROW**

Finally, the offering time can be a moment of great personal growth.

Proverbs 11:24 declares, "One person gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty."

Malachi 3:10 takes it even further, "Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing."

In giving, God promises us an overflowing blessing!

I have heard many people share stories of financial generosity that have multiplied many times over in their lives. This is not some magical quid pro quo or a financial investment strategy, but a result of learning how not to hold anything back from God.

The return on generosity is not financial but spiritual. For when we act like our Lord in self-giving

love, we come to channel the Spirit's power which inevitably fills us with joy.

I don't know if any of you have ever played *Guitar Hero* on Xbox, but it is a tremendous amount of fun. The idea is simple. Hit buttons on a video game controller shaped like a guitar, which then automatically plays the right notes on the TV, complete with adoring fans screaming their love.

My favorite song to play is "Sweet Emotion" by Aerosmith. As I hit those buttons, hear the music and the screams of the crowd, for the briefest of moments, I felt cool! Sadly, I was snapped out of my reverie by Matthew's mortification, "Dad! What are you doing on my Xbox!?"

When we live generous lives, we channel the Spirit of Christ, and come to know what it is to act like God! For God is love and when we are generous, we are being loving! Love begets love; the more we love, the more others will love. And that is what will get us through!

But there are two parts to this transformation: the joy and the sorrow. We not only channel God's joy in the offering but God's deep compassion and hurting heart.

Remember, it was in a time of crisis that Hannah went to the house of God in prayer in which she offered her heart's pain to God, which led to her to offer her greatest blessing which, in turn, led Samuel to bless the nation of Israel.

Prayer and offering go together in worship. Prayer is meant to expand our hearts – to have the compassion of God. 1 Timothy 2:1-5 reads, "I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior..."

These prayers should be as wide as God's love and as specific as God's tender compassion for the least ones among us.

During the time of offering, we should be opening our heart to those suffering, alone, and in

grief. We offer ourselves to God to feel their pain and to do whatever we can to relieve it.

But it is also a time for honesty, to voice our frustrations, our fears, our doubts. For even as we offer ourselves to God, "God use me as your vessel," we know there are certain things that we cannot do. That God needs to do for us. It is in times like this those needs become so clear.

At the time of the Coronavirus...

Fear comes in waves:

*Will it claim my life or those I love?*

*Will it decimate my finances putting me on the brink of collapse?*

Doubts trickle in:

*Would an all-powerful, all loving God allow this to happen?*

*Where is God?*

And frustrations mount:

*God, why are you not inspiring some scientist to wipe out this virus?*

We may not receive an answer. However, during our worship together we remind ourselves in song, in prayer, and in passing the peace that in every crisis that humanity has faced, God has proved faithful.

We even remember in the Apostle's Creed that Jesus went to the depths of Hell for our sake. That means that God, in order to carry us through, is leaving nothing on the table in this.

It is in worshipping together, as the people of God, fellow followers of our Lord, that this notion takes hold so very powerfully in our hearts.

There is an amazing – even miraculous – power present whenever we gather...even when we gather together online. Simply being together buoys our spirits, strengthens our resolve, and gives us the confidence of the people of God.

Think about those funerals you have been to in which, in the midst of your grief, you left with hope and confidence and deep thankfulness for the good news of the Gospel, the powerful love of Christ.

I remember Chapman McMeekin's service several years ago. Such a precious and wonderful person who loved her family so much. Before that service, there was almost a crushing feeling of sorrow at how much of her life was un-lived.

But, during the service, the prayers and the music were a healing balm. When her husband Thomas stood to speak about all the Angels he encountered through your care, I was in awe at how powerfully the Spirit of God worked through him. And when I looked out at the congregation, I saw hundreds and hundreds of people that had come out of deep love and a desire for the Good News of the Gospel.

There was a palpable power of hope created by God through us being together through offering ourselves in worship. I felt it. I know many of you did as well.

We did not leave with answers. But we left with faith, hope, and love.

Last week, we noticed that hundreds of people – in fact, more than are here on a normal Sunday – tuned in online.

We received dozens of emails of thanksgiving for the worship service. We felt connected to you. By the Spirit's power we are together right now, letting us know we are not alone, we are not afraid, we have hope, hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, who will go anywhere, do anything, and bless us always.

Amen.