

September 6, 2015
2 Corinthians 9:6-8
Matthew 6:19-21

Weird Things Presbyterians Do:
#1 We take up an Offering

If you want to make people uncomfortable in church, then talk about offering. More specifically talk about why the church has an offering every week and why it is an important part of worship and why it is important for all of us to participate in the offering. Hint. Hint. Most Presbyterians get a cold chill when discussing the offering or money in general. We get anxious about our own budgets and we get worried we might offend others by asking them to contribute. Presbyterians are more of a ‘pass the collection plate quietly’ kind of people. We prefer music playing during our offering so no one can hear what others are doing. We prefer heads bowed and eyes closed so no one can watch others are putting in the plate. We Presbyterians aren’t like those other churches that make a big deal about the offering. For us, it is a private, personal matter to be done during worship without fanfare and without the minister going on and on about it.

In worship, we have an offering, but we don’t like to talk about it very much. We don’t normally discuss why we do it. Or how it fits into our

Sunday service. Maybe we think it seems kind of obvious. We are obviously paying the bills and rewarding the preacher for a good sermon. And we know all the ‘ought-to’s’ and the ‘should’s’ about the offering. So talking about it seems like a bit much. It’s like talking about why we should eat our vegetables and why we should wear sunscreen. We know we should, so talking about it only stirs up guilt and shame and annoyance. So quietly and almost apologetically we pass the plates through the pews. Which is why taking up an offering ranks as #1 for us on the list of Weird things that Presbyterians do.

It’s #1 on OUR list mostly because taking up the offering feels weird to US. Asking for contributions though, is not weird for most organizations out there. There are plenty of clubs and service groups that do fundraising and require membership fees. There are plenty of churches that feel quite comfortable emphasizing the offering and telling their members to put their money where their mouths are in order to show their commitment. They track pledges and have special offering Sundays. They publish the results. I’ve heard rumors some churches even ask for tax returns to help you calculate the appropriate 10% tithe

of your income which you should be giving. There are lots of ways that churches pass the plate.

On the radio program, Interfaith Voices, the topic recently was how religious groups raise funds. Specifically about how American Jews and American Christians go about it in very different ways. It is normal for synagogues to require members to pay synagogue dues, which can be up to \$2500 a year. And then to attend the High Holy Day services like Rosh Hoshannah and Yom Kippur, you have to purchase tickets. This year at a synagogue in Los Angeles, the price for an adult ticket is \$325; for children, it's \$100. And for non-members, it's \$400 to attend worship. American Jews expect this, though, and they see it as a practical way for the synagogue to operate. Early American Christians used to do the same thing. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, members of Protestant churches paid Pew Rent. The better the seats, the more you paid for them. Can you imagine us charging for the choice pew at the back or your favorite aisle seat? Can you imagine us selling tickets for the Joy Gift service or for Christmas Eve or for Easter Sunday?

American churches have shifted away from a fee model to a donation model. Some say it's because we have become more democratic. Some say it's because we aren't comfortable asking folks to pay to be in church. Some say it's because the freely-given grace of God should be offered as a freely-given gift. The way our churches raise money and our thoughts about the offering may have changed over the years. But every Sunday, we pass the plate because it's important. It's important that we offer our gifts to God in worship. And it's important for three reasons: First, it's important to God. Second, it's important for others. Third, it is important for us.

First and most obviously, our offerings are important because they are important to God. Since the very earliest days, human beings have known this. We have made altars and built temples offer our gifts to God. Offerings are how we humans communicate with the divine. Offerings help us say thank you to God or I'm sorry or Please help me. They show God our desire to be on the same page with God, to be in communion with God. And we bring what is valuable and precious as a sign of that. At temples like the one that Jesus went to in Jerusalem,

people sacrificed animals or brought in portions of their harvest and their income to show God they were serious about their connection with God. They meant it.

I was in a Vietnamese restaurant the other day and there was a little altar set up in an out-of-the-way spot with a few Buddhist gods in it. There was a beautiful array of offerings set out for these gods. Apples and candy and carefully wrapped rolls of money and incense and cigarettes. I wondered at all the effort involved. And how devout and diligent these folks were to set out these offerings regularly. And I thought about my offering practices and how they usually do not involve that much devotion or attention to detail. But what if they did? What if I made my offerings more tangible and on a more daily basis? What would that look like and what would those offerings be? Maybe my chores could be my offering to God. Or my homework. Or my responsibilities as a parent. Or my work on the job. Or my willingness to help a stranger. Those could be my daily offerings to God. And every Sunday, I would bring what was most valuable, and most precious. And give it to God.

To show God that I'm serious. I'm serious about being in communion with God.

Our offerings are important to God. They are signs of our commitment and our intention to be godly. Our offerings don't pay for the show or the preacher's sermon. It's true that it might seem that way since the offering does come right after the sermon. We do it that way for a reason. Because the offering is our response to God. In the scripture and the sermon, we hear the good news. We are reminded of how God wants to be in communion with us. In the very beginning, God created life and God is always recreating it. We are witnesses to how God gives us what is most precious and valuable to us. God gives, we receive and then we are invited to be part of that divine action. Giving and receiving, self-offering and self-accepting, it is part of the holy life of God.

On Sunday morning, we give our offerings because it is important to God. And second, it is important for others. The truth is, is that our offerings are necessary for this church to exist. It takes money for the lights to work and for the air conditioning to come on. It takes money to pay the organist and the minister. And those who clean the church and

care for the kids in the nursery. It takes money to fix our bell and to fix our windows and to fix our drainage outside. It will take money to pay off our new Fellowship hall and it will take money to put some nice landscaping around it. And all of these things aren't just for us, they are for others. I put my offering in the plate for you. And for you. And for that person over there. And for the visitor who will come next week. And the people who will come ten years from now. We give our offerings for the sake of others. So we can host the Community Garden and yoga classes and AA meetings and the Girl Scout groups and the community worship services. So that we can support the Backpack program and the Homeplace Nursing Home and Buckhorn Home for Children and Camp Burnamwood. We give our offerings for the sake of others, so they may know the love of God that is given for them and for the sake of this world.

We give our offerings every Sunday because it's important to God and it's important for others. And third, because it's important for us. We do it for God and for others but we also do it for ourselves. We give because God gives to us in abundance as Paul writes in 2 Corinthians.

But we give in order to receive. We expect to participate in the joyful abundant life of God when we give. And if we only give a little bit to God, then we will only receive a little bit. “The one who sows sparingly,” says Paul, “will also reap sparingly.” We give our offerings to God because it’s good for us. It deepens us. It strengthens us. It reminds us that this life isn’t all there is for us. And money isn’t all there is. There is something much more precious and valuable. And we can only receive it when we give up what we cling to the most. For our own benefit we give our money to clear out space in our hearts for God. Do not store up treasures in this world, Jesus says. Store up treasures in heaven. Step into God’s generous heart so that God’s generosity will step into yours.

I am not a Facebook junkie, but this week, two stories reminded me of this. The Syrian Refugee crisis has reached terrifying proportions. Millions families are fleeing from the violence to the surrounding countries in the Mediterranean. Families are taking terrible risks to escape and we have heard how some of those journeys have ended in tragedy. The nation of Iceland officially offered to take in 50 refugees.

But when the citizens of Iceland heard about it, they formed a group on Facebook, and they began offering their homes and their cars and their lives in order to help. They urged to government to do more. And now the government of Iceland may take as many as 5000 refugees. Giving up the treasures of this world for the treasure of the Kingdom of God.

Another story: in Hazard KY this week, an apartment building downtown went up in flames. Thirty-five families lost their homes and most of their belongings. The First Presbyterian Church in Hazard, which is right up the street, opened its doors to provide shelter and it has committed to helping the families recover. When there has been so much in the news about what it means to be a Christian and the courthouse protests and political speeches, these stories spoke the truth to me.

Christian freedom is the freedom to give. It is a generous life in communion with the heart of God. It is a holy life of self-giving.

God shows us God's heart here today. At this communion table, God in Jesus Christ offers himself to us. Here God gives us peace and grace.

Here we are offered love and light that scatters darkness and death. Here Jesus offers us his life so that we may have life abundant. God gives

Godself to us, and we, we are invited to give ourselves to God. We give our offerings: Making them for our sake, so we may be closer to God.

Making them for the sake of others, so that they might know God's generosity. Making them for the sake of God, our God, who gives us life here and hope for the life to come.