

Dear Friends in Christ,

Several of you have been overseas, so you understand. If you ever visit an impoverished third-world country, not one torn by the traumas of war, but a country enjoying times of peace, you will be surprised.

But before we go overseas, let's think about our own lives. All our lives we pursue things. We save to buy the newest phone, a shinier car – or maybe we even put ourselves in debt just to get these things. The day we get them, we smile from ear to ear—until we see someone with a newer phone or car. We can't wait for the next paycheck to buy some new clothing. We love it and wear it at least three or four times before it is forgotten in the back of the closet. And who can stand those plain old white kitchen appliances? Oh, they work, but they look so, um, 20th century! Everyone who is anyone ought to have stainless steel or better yet the new *black* stainless steel.

Then you get off the plane in a third world country at a rinky-dink, so-called international airport. As the taxi takes you into town you see people on one-speed bicycles with chickens and goats tied to the bike rack, and people selling unrefrigerated food on the side of the road, and children running around with dingy, torn clothing and – here is the surprising thing – smiles on their faces. Why are they smiling? They should be miserable. They are miserable, they just don't know it, right? I mean, how can anyone be happy eating like that, dressed like that, getting from place to place like that. They have no stuff!

Materialism is the idolatry of chasing after material things, created things, rather than the Creator. It is the lie that filling our lives with lots of stuff will somehow bring us joy and happiness. It's the deception that these earthly treasures and pleasures will somehow last and not disappoint us. It is failing to put everything we have and everything we are into thankful service to God. And the worst part about materialism is that it is so much part of our life that we don't even know we are doing it!

This morning we begin a stewardship series in which we explore the reasons we give to the Lord and how we do that. Together we will examine the motives of our hearts, because **JOYFUL GENEROSITY** begins with a heart that worships God. As believers, we begin with this question, a question raised by today's reading:

IF THE EARTH IS THE LORD'S, WHAT CAN I OFFER HIM?

On Friday, what did you think when the sun finally burned off I don't know how many days of clouds? You finally saw the bright clear blue sky, felt the warm sun, and breathed the cool, dry exhilarating air! How did you feel? Our dog went out to the cul-de-sac and stood there in the middle, nose to the wind and closed her eyes and just stood there. Welcome autumn. Welcome changing leaves, cool air, geese flying in formation, campfires. And welcome sacrifice.

If you were an ancient Jew, September was a time of sacrifice. The Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement and The Feast of Tabernacles all fall in a three week period which is happening right now. In the Feast of Tabernacles which is being celebrated even today, more animals were sacrificed at the Jewish temple than at any other time in the Jewish year.

Hundreds of animals were ritually slaughtered to remind God's people of how serious and hateful sin is to God. More sacrifice for sin was offered at this time of year than other time to remind God's people that *none* of us is perfect and *none* of us can pay for the guilt of our sin. (Those sacrifices were pictures of a future perfect sacrifice in the Messiah.)

On the third day of this Feast of Tabernacles, in the middle of bringing all the animals to be slaughtered at the altar, the Jewish liturgy included this psalm, Psalm 50. The temple choir publicly sang Psalm 50 just when tens of thousands gathered in Jerusalem with all the sounds and smells and sights, not all of them pleasant, of a line of bulls, rams and lambs being slaughtered and burned on the altar of burnt offering. In the middle of that ceremony of sacrifice, God says—and here I read our sermon text—

Psalm 50:7 “Hear, O my people, and I will speak,
O Israel, and I will testify against you:
I am God, your God.

⁸*I do not rebuke you for your sacrifices
or your burnt offerings, which are ever before me.*

⁹*I have no need of a bull from your stall
or of goats from your pens,*

¹⁰*for every animal of the forest is mine,
and the cattle on a thousand hills.*

¹¹*I know every bird in the mountains,
and the creatures of the field are mine.*

¹²*If I were hungry I would not tell you,
for the world is mine, and all that is in it.*

¹³*Do I eat the flesh of bulls
or drink the blood of goats?*

¹⁴*Sacrifice thank offerings to God,
fulfill your vows to the Most High,*

¹⁵*and call upon me in the day of trouble;
I will deliver you, and you will honor me.”*

Are Your Offerings Right Offerings?

God asks Israel if they understand what is going on. They have followed the rules. They have made the journey to the temple, they have made the required sacrifices, they are worshiping in the sanctuary following all the rules. Now God asks, “Do you know why?”

You, do you know why? Do you know why you come to church every Sunday? Do you know why you put an offering in the offering plate on a weekly or monthly basis? Do you know why you celebrate Easter and Christmas? Do you know why you pray before and/or after you eat a meal? Do you know?

God has a peculiar way of bringing this whole thing up. In verse 8 he says, “***I do not rebuke you [my people] for your sacrifices or your burnt offerings.***” That is a strange, some might even say underhanded, way to bring up the subject. Listen again: “***I do not rebuke you for your sacrifices.***” Well, if you don't rebuke me for my sacrifices, then why say it? That's the way domestic arguments get started. “I do not rebuke you for the way you cook my supper.” “I do not rebuke you for the way you straighten up your side of the bedroom.” It

sounds like you are spoiling for a fight! *“I do not rebuke you for your sacrifices.”* What is that?

I wish I could get a direct revelation from God of exactly what he meant when he said that. What seems pretty clear is that Israel *was* bringing the sacrifices they were supposed to be bringing. They were fulfilling the letter of the law. But it seems that God had an issue with *how* they were bringing them, in two ways.

First 1) some supported the services at the tabernacle kind of with the attitude, “God needs me to do this.”

Second 2) others, or maybe even the same people, had the attitude that now that they had brought the annual sacrifice to Israel’s fall festivals, now they were done with their obligation to God and they could get on with life.

Neither way of looking at things is joyful generosity toward God. The first is an “If I don’t do it, no one will” attitude of frustration, and the second is a “What do I have to do to get outta here?” attitude. Both are self-centered and selfish rather than God-centered and joyful.

Don’t Be Proud—Anything We Offer Is God’s

God rebukes the first attitude in verses 8 to 13. *“⁸I have no need of a bull from your stall or of goats from your pens, ⁹for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills... ¹²If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is mine, and all that is in it.”* As all Israel brought their sacrifices, this was sung and God was reminding them: “I don’t need any of this!”

In a sense our church does. If the light bill doesn’t get paid, the lights get shut off. But in a truer sense God needs nothing.

In different times of Israel’s history, worship of God diminished to a mere glowing coal buried under a pile of ashes. But that did not make God smaller. We have witnessed the same thing over the centuries of the New Testament. As the Jewish people, for the most part, rejected Jesus the Messiah, God’s kingdom moved into the Greek world, then to the Roman world, then to wider European culture, then as rationalism rotted out most of European Christianity, it was reborn in the colonies, especially America, and now, I fear, the Gospel of Jesus is being rejected in America and finding new homes in Africa and South Asia. God is none the smaller for it.

We can give God nothing that is not his already. That does not mean God wants nothing from us. But he does not want us to imagine that as we are dependent on God, God is dependent on us.

When the Israelite brought the sacrifice to God, it was not that God needed something, but that the Israelite needed something from God. When we come to worship, it is not that God needs us here, but that we need what God offers us here. We need the message of Christ, our Savior from our sins which we daily commit. We need the strength, encouragement and forgiveness offered in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. We need what God has and what God offers. Don’t imagine it to be the other way around!

Offer the Sacrifice of Your Heart

The other misunderstanding Israel had about giving to God is formalism. They brought sacrifices in their hands without the participation of their heart.

In our day you might think of the person who comes to church just often enough to keep pastor from giving them a call. Or it can happen if I should write a sermon just because that is what I am supposed to do, or anytime we pray a prayer but don't think about what we are saying. As they say, we are just going through the motions.

Here God offers positive direction to his people: ***“Sacrifice thank offerings to God, fulfill your vows to the Most High, and call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me.”*** God brings up sacrifices again. But this time he says we should bring sacrifices—which is kind of the opposite of what he was hinting at when he said, ***“I do not rebuke you for your sacrifices.”*** But there is a difference. The first time he was talking about the sacrifices themselves. Now he talks about the hearts that bring the sacrifices. Every phrase of these last two verses speaks of a willing heart. When he says, ***“Sacrifice thank offerings,”*** he is talking about a different type of offering. God did not require thank offerings, like he did the burnt offerings. Thank offerings were freewill. They were what the name says: given out of thanksgiving and not from compulsion.

The rest of these verses speak of the same willing heart and attitude of trust: ***“Fulfill your vows to the Most High, and call upon me in the day of trouble, I will deliver you, and you will honor me.”***

Real religion isn't a contract God's people are locked into, it is a relationship of trust we live out. That is why God said in verse 8, ***“I do not rebuke you for your sacrifices.”*** God would have been pleased with their sacrifices, if only they had brought their hearts with their sacrifices.

And so it is that God was pleased when Abel brought an offering of fat portions from the firstborn of the flock—the best he had. Abel wasn't giving God anything he needed, but he offered it with a right heart. And because it is a heart issue, the Scriptures praise not only big gifts but also little gifts. Jesus blessed *“anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name”* (Mk 9:41). And when a certain widow gave two copper coins – you, know, like the pennies people throw out their car windows because they are such a bother—when Jesus saw an impoverished widow put two copper coins in the collection plate, he praised her for her generous gift, because her heart was in it. (Mark 12:41-44). You see, it isn't about the gift, it is about the heart that brings the gift.

Go to a home with young children in the family, and look at the refrigerator. Are they saving those for the Smithsonian Art Museum? Look in your top desk drawer, in the back. Why are you keeping those old useless nick-naks. It's not the gift, but the heart that brought it. These are things we don't need, but things we treasure.

And when you, clothed in the righteousness of our Lord Jesus, get to God's heavenly home one day. Take a look at God's refrigerator, and dig around in his top desk drawer. I wonder what you will find. I wonder what mementos of your relationship he will be treasuring.

If the Earth Is the LORD's, What Can You Offer Him? I think you know the answer. Amen.