

A Sermon for the 19th Sunday after Trinity, October 22, 2006
The Stephen C. Scarlett

At St. Matthew's Church, we don't have a Stewardship Sunday, an every member canvas or a publicized stewardship campaign with a catchy theme. We give a sermon on the subject, send it to our members and ask them to respond with a pledge for the following year.

Of course, money is not a once a year topic. It is part of weekly worship. To understand worship is to understand why we give. What do we come to church to do? To hear a sermon? To sing hymns? To receive comfort? To fulfill a religious obligation? No. We gather around the altar to make an offering to God. Everything else we do or receive relates to or results from that offering.

To make an offering to God is the essential human vocation. God created us and gave us the creation as a gift. We are called to offer the creation back to God in thanksgiving. As Alexander Schmemmann says, "The unique position of man in the universe is that he alone is to *bless* God for the food and the life he receives from Him" (*For the Life of the World*, p. 15).

The first humans sinned in that they claimed a part of the creation as their own. They took the fruit of the forbidden tree and ate. They did not bless God for his gift. Rather, with ingratitude, they said of the creation "This is mine to do with as I please."

In the Original Sin, man turned from God to pursue a created thing. The consequence is that fallen man, by nature, pursues created things as the goal of life. Rather than seeing created things as a sign of the creator, man sees only the things. Man is, in a sense, enslaved to the things. He went from having dominion over the creation to being subject to it.

The Son of God became man to restore what was lost by the fall. As man, Jesus fulfilled the vocation that Adam failed. Jesus offered himself to God in life as the fulfillment of the law of Moses and in death as the perfect offering for sin. Jesus rose from the dead as the beginning of a new creation.

We were baptized into Jesus Christ. We became part of the new creation through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Our sins are forgiven. We are restored to communion with God and to the original human vocation. We are called to respond to the gift with thanksgiving by offering the creation, indeed, ourselves back to God.

This is what we gather around the altar to do. First, Christ is revealed to us through the Word of God. Then, we respond to the biblical revelation with an offering.. We offer alms and oblations. The oblations are the bread and the wine. These represent the creation and man's participation in it. God gives wheat and human labor turns it into bread. God gives grapes and human labor turns it into wine. As we place these on the altar, we offer the creation and our labor back to God.

The alms are the money that we put into the plate and place on the altar at the offertory along with the oblations. There is a connection between the two. The oblations represent the creation and our labor. The alms are the actual fruit of our labor. Our alms connect each of us to the oblations, turning them from symbol into reality, making our individual participation in the offering real.

Now, the biblical unit for giving the first fruits to God is the tithe. Literally, the tenth. God

commanded the people of Israel to offer back to Him the first tenth of what He had given to them (Leviticus 27:30-32, Malachi 3:10). We can understand the meaning of the tithe only within the context of man's vocation offer the creation back to God. The tithe, the first part, represents the whole. By offering God the first part, we acknowledge that it all belongs to Him.

This act fulfills the human vocation to bless God for the food and life we receive from him. And that which is offered to God in Christ participates in the blessing of the new creation. God puts his blessing on the rest and makes it sufficient to meet our needs.

The logic flows in the other direction also. That which we do not offer back to God remains a part of the fallen world. It remains a thing in and of itself, an idol, apart from God and his blessing. In this we see how people can have so much but be so discontented. What we claim as our own remains subject to the futility and death of the fall.

But what we offer to God in Christ comes back to us in resurrected form. To see this, let us follow our oblations. They are offered to God. Then they are consecrated so that they become the body and blood of the risen and glorified Christ. The creation offered to God in Christ participates in the Resurrection. Mere bread and mere wine, ordinary food, become the bread from heaven and the medicine of immortality.

We learn at the altar that what we offer to God is not a tax that leaves us poorer. Rather, the very ability to offer alms and oblations, to offer and ourselves, our souls, and our bodies to God in Christ is a privilege. As we exercise this privilege of offering, we participate in the blessings made available through the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus..

This is why the Bible contains so many passages that speak of the blessing of giving. For example, an Anglian favorite is Proverbs 3:9: AHonour the LORD with thy substance, and with the firstfruits of all thine increase: So shall thy barns be filled with plenty, and thy presses shall burst out with new wine. @ This is the way God always intended it to be. Man would offer the creation back to God and God would in turn pour his blessing upon the creation for man's use.

Thus, we should tithe because we can. We have been reconciled to God in Christ. We have been restored to our priestly vocation to live in joyful thanksgiving for all he has given us. We can offer the creation and our tithe to God and receive back from him the blessing of resurrection and new life in his kingdom Along with his promise to provide us with the things we need to live.