

Sermon for Grace and Holy Trinity Church, Richmond, VA
Proper 25, Year C, October 27, 2019
The Rev. Bill Queen, "We Present Ourselves to God"
Joel 2:23-32

God: may your love burn in our hearts like living flame; may we find our forgiveness here; may we become one family, where everyone belongs [paraphrase of song "Come, Share the Lord"]

I want to contrast two items this morning; first, an offering plate; you see these often, and I thank you for making generous use of them; remember that we always stand as the offering plates are brought forward; I want to make sure you are aware that standing then is not just a custom, nor do we stand just because we are singing the Doxology at that point in the service

the special significance in standing for the presentation of the offerings is that by it we show that we all are participating in the act of giving, and to recognize that all of our gifts have been gathered together and presented together; it is more than a collection of individual gifts; it is one gift given by this church community; it is a reminder that we are all in this together—in the giving and in the ministries that flow from this giving

next week we will have a special kind of giving to be recognized, as all of our pledge cards will be placed on the altar to be blessed at all services; this special annual offering is one combined gift from all of you that is meant to sustain God's ministries carried out through this church community for the year to come; and remember that future years after that will build upon 2020; and also that 2020 is a special year, as it will be the start of our new Rector's tenure with us

during our Discernment Committee's work our candidates for new Rector will be looking closely at us, just as we will be looking closely at them; they will look at our finances to see what will be available to fund the kind of ministries they will hope to undertake with us; and they will look at our pledging to see what level of commitment to our ministries all members of our congregation have

the other item I want to describe for you is a paper weight; it is a molded plaster disc; it has a splattering of green and blue paint on it, which may have been intended to represent something that I cannot recognize; perhaps those were my son Philip's favorite colors; I know it was Philip who made it because of his name and date on it; the date tells me Philip was a month shy of being two years old when he made it; it has been sitting on my desk for almost 25 years

I have never in my entire life needed a paperweight; its shape is too small and uneven to serve as a coaster; but what it does serve as, for me, is a physical reminder of that cute little boy at that age; a reminder of how he has changed and grown over the years; (he is now, based upon his instagram feed, climbing mountains and walking across slack lines from cliff to cliff above deep valleys out West - your prayers are appreciated); a reminder of just how proud I am to be his father and of all the memories and the connections we have formed as father and son over the years; the paper weight is a representation of love; and I can recall receiving so many other gifts like it that were made at other schools, in other years, by all three of our children; each one presented with a tremendous sense of pride from having made something, and from a desire to give it as a gift of love; childrens' gifts, such as this, no matter how small, are really a gift of themselves

and that's what connects these items together, the offering plate and the paperweight; you are all participating in this act of giving together to something special that will extend a long legacy of ministry in this place onward into the future; and what you have given has been given out of great love—love of God, love of God's people, and love of God's dreams for this church and for this community

what you give to the church each week and through your annual pledge is a lot more than the money and time commitments it represents—it is your sharing of your smarts, your energy, and your passion for ministry; you have given from all of the time and skill it took you to earn that money and earn that free time; you have given from your desire to see God's kingdom spread through the ministries of this church community; you have given of nothing less than yourselves; you have heard me use this offertory sentence, repeatedly, from Romans 12:1: "I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present yourselves as a living sacrifice;" that's what you do every time you send a contribution forward

wouldn't it be wonderful if all of our gifts were given with the same kind of joy, and love, and pride with which a child presents their gift; "look what I have for you, Daddy!" remember this is the way that Jesus addressed God, as Abba, as Daddy; "look Daddy at what I've made for you—I want you to have this!"

I'm having the offering plates put upon the altar to remain there throughout the Eucharistic Prayer from now on, as a weekly reminder of this; so I want you to picture this: when the offering plates are brought up and placed on the altar every week, and especially next week when we have a year's worth of your love and hopes and dreams for God's work in this parish represented by your pledge cards also placed upon the altar, picture that you have actually placed yourselves upon the altar

these gifts are more than just a representation or a symbol of you; they are you; they are your sacramental offering of yourselves to God; and like everything we place upon the altar, we give our gifts to God in order that God may give them back to us, changed and blessed; we offer God bread and wine, and God gives it back to us changed and blessed as the Body and Blood of Christ; think for a minute about how that has come true for you; think about how your involvement with God here through GHTC has changed you (pause); think about how your involvement with God here through GHTC has brought blessings back to you (pause)

on behalf of the Vestry and of this entire parish community, thanks to each of you for what you have given of yourselves in the past; thank you for what you are giving of yourselves now in the present; and thank you for what you are pledging for 2020 to give of yourselves in the future; may we all continue to be especially attentive to how we to offer ourselves to God; and may we all be especially thankful for the so many ways that God is blessing each and every one of us, our parish, and our community we serve