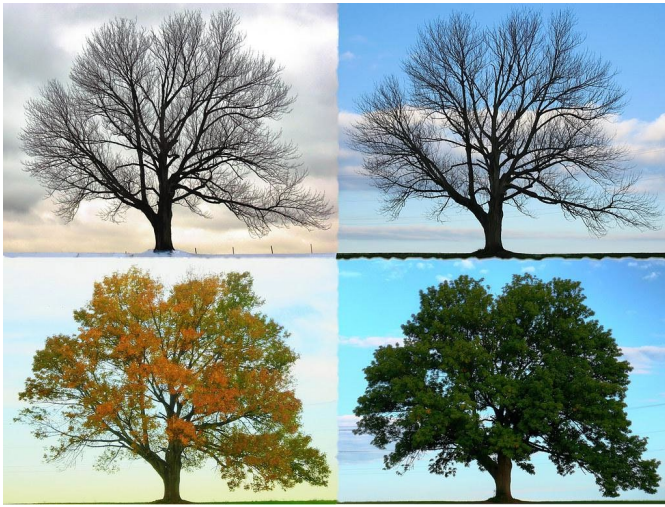




SEASONS OF SACRIFICE: MEDITATIONS ON STEWARDSHIP

The following are four sermons written by Dr. Peter Shidemantle when he was pastor of Pebble Hill Presbyterian Church (PCUSA), Syracuse, NY for a 2005 Capital Campaign. The author has given permission to share these sermons with other churches as a stewardship devotional.



“Seasons of Sacrifice: Meditations on Stewardship”

Dr. Shidemantle’s Preface

My high school Sunday school teacher gave me a book upon the occasion of my ordination to ministry by Arnold Kenseth entitled “Seasons, Sacraments and Sabbaths.” It is a book of prayers and meditations on the seasons of the year, which, in beautiful poetic language (Kenseth was a professor of English as well as a pastor) reflects on the rhythms and cycles of the earth’s turning as occasions for the praise and wonder of God. Since receiving this gift from a dear friend and teacher (who died much too young), I have been taken by how the movement of our spirits reflects the wider movements of which we are part. The world’s mystery touches our own, and in the meeting the mystery of God is revealed.

These sermons were preached from October 16 to November 26, 2005, as part of a capital stewardship campaign at Pebble Hill Church that called upon the congregation to prayerfully consider a truly sacrificial gift to the church. The concept of sacrifice, I realized, was something I had not seriously considered, let alone preached about. I have given lip service to it, but have I practiced it as a discipline of my faith? Deep down I have known that sacrifice, as one faithful member reminded me, “completes us.” Yet in our busy, performance-oriented society, we (adults, children, families) are being pulled in so many directions that it often seems that sacrifice is what we are always about. We seldom “have time for ourselves,” we say. But what I think that really means is that we are in danger of losing touch with the truth that Jesus spoke when he said “whoever loses life for my sake will gain it.” This cannot be done grudgingly, but only as the free expression of the soul who knows where his or her completeness is to be found.

I suggest in these meditations that sacrifice is a process, and the seasons of the year offer a window through which to follow its movement within us. There are other windows, of course, but this is one that captures me. The subterranean work of winter, the tender shoots of spring, the lush fullness of summer, and the fruits of the fall harvest are reflected in the movement of our spirits as God stirs in us a quiet calling to find a fuller and more meaningful life in Christ.

I want to thank the congregation of Pebble Hill Presbyterian Church, who for 13 years has been the “seedbed” for my attempts to share God’s word. If some of those seeds have taken root and grown, then I am thankful to God who gives the growth.



Seasons of Sacrifice: Winter Work

Devotion: *Hebrews 10:11-18*

Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time, he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy. The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First, he says:

This is the covenant I will make with them After that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, And I will write them in their minds.

Then he adds:

Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more. And where these have been forgiven there is not longer any sacrifice for sin.

One of the reasons I love living in the northeast is our change of seasons. Most years, not all years, we get the best of each of them – the warm, sunny days of summer; the beautiful colors and crisp air of fall; the kind of winter wonderland that Johnny Mathis sings about; and spring that bursts with growth. I can't imagine living where the four seasons aren't so clearly distinctly shown, and the cycles of life aren't worked out in front of your eyes like they are around here.

Of course, the church has its own cycles and seasons as well, and we have come to expect that this time of year is stewardship season. This year we are especially aware of it as, in addition to inviting your pledge toward the annual budget of the church, we are undertaking a three-year capital campaign to pay off the debt we have encumbered in the construction and renovation work we have done in the last couple of years, and for which in our first campaign we raised over half the money we need; and hopefully to complete a couple of other capital projects that were not included in the original plan, as well as helping resource our growing "Friday Nite" program with middle school age kids in the community. We are being asked to prayerfully consider making a *sacrificial* gift toward this campaign and this ministry, and I am asked to preach about it over these next four Sundays. I thought that there would be a number of ways to go about this. As a lectionary preacher most of the time (preaching on the assigned texts each week) I could actually look for the stewardship message in the readings assigned for each Sunday. That would be a good challenge, but one I'm not much interested in taking up just now. Another would be to choose some classic stewardship texts and preach on them – another solid option, but a little too predictable. In thinking about it and praying on it, I decided that I wanted to focus these next four Sundays on this theme of "sacrifice" because I realized how little I (we?) actually consider sacrifice, not just in terms of our financial stewardship, but in terms of my faith in general.

When I think of "sacrifice" I have a certain picture of it that has been influenced by old movies and growing up with a lot of Roman Catholic friends. I remember those movies where they'd sacrifice virgins to the volcano gods, or some such thing, which always struck me, even as a little kid, as something more than a little unenlightened. The Catholic part of it for me has to do with my friends always having to "give something up" for Lent, which was something we Presbyterians were never that big on. I think it may have come from the idea that Christ has already sacrificed his very life for our sins, so the thought that somehow our own actions of self-denial or sacrifice, while perhaps noble, weren't something that was in any way "owed" to God, since that price

had already been paid.

It wasn't until later that I began to gain a more positive appreciation of sacrifice and what it is. But even so, it still seemed to be an exceptional thing, in my mind – not a regular or even normal part of life, including religious life. It was the soldier throwing himself on the hand grenade to save his buddies. It was the single mother working three jobs to save enough to send her children to college. It was the kind of thing that people would see, something that could be admired, willingly taking on hardship and worse so that others might benefit. It was later still when I came to a deeper appreciation of sacrifice – as not just an exceptional thing, but as something more basic and more integral to our faith and our giving of ourselves and our resources. But this is where the idea of sacrifice can most easily be dismissed. I know, because I know how easy it is for me to dismiss it. By “sacrifice” we mean giving up something that is important to you for the sake of something that is more important. Time spent doing one thing that you enjoy - like sailing or golf, maybe – versus spending that same time with a kid who needs a mentor. Money spent on that new car versus that same money going to meet some human need or enable a good work of some kind. I don't know about you, but my family and I don't normally go about it that way. It's not as intentional as that. Though there seldom seems to be much, if any, excess time or money, we do pretty much what we want to do. We aren't in the habit of denying ourselves much of anything, and we still manage to give and to share (within our “means”). But to be honest, I think we'd have to say that even though we live fairly modestly compared to many in our community and society, we still give, for the most part, out of our abundance, without much thought toward what we might give up to give even more.

So, I've got a way to go to truly know about sacrifice – and I want to explore with you, instead of a “season” of sacrifice (which is what I thought I'd name this series over the next four weeks), “seasons of sacrifice.” And I want to explore it from the perspective of the actual seasons of the year, in which the cycles of life, death, and rebirth frame our lives. I begin with winter, a time of waiting and hoping toward the spring. It is a time of apparent stillness and quietness, when life is stirring, but under the surface of things. It is an apt metaphor for the work we do under the surface of our visible lives, where deeper things are considered, whether they ever get to the surface or not. It's the level of dreams and hopes, the level of wonder and doubt. It is this work, this subterranean work, that Christ would have us attend to, and not ignore. It is where we take up his suggestion, if we take it up, to consider the lilies of the field, that neither toil nor spin, but God in his mercy adorns them so beautifully.

It is where we consider, if we consider it, his question, "What does it profit a person to gain the whole world but lose his or her soul?" or his question "Who do you say that I am?" It's winter work, work beneath the surface. It can work "on you" while you are busy with other things, attending to the expected things. But if it is to really grow in you, if this work is to be fruitful in you, you have to pay attention to it, not just on Sunday mornings, but daily.

What is sacrifice, there beneath the surface, under the ice, the crust that separates the sensible, the logical, the safe, the affordable from the life that is stirring in your soul? What is the work that is going on there for you? What is your work there?

I think that the question is sometimes put this way: are we truly living the values and the priorities in life that we espouse, or want to espouse for ourselves? This takes a certain degree of honesty with ourselves, of course, that is not always easy to muster. It is some of the basic content of our weekly confession, that we have not lived as we ought to have lived - done those things we shouldn't, left undone those things we should, that there is no health in us. There is nothing that we can do about that, really. We always fall short of what God's law demands. We cannot gain perfection by our own efforts, which are always tainted by sin. We can't sacrifice to atone for our sinfulness, for none is needed. "Christ (has) offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins..." (Hebrews 10:12) There is no offering we can make, no sacrifice, that can accomplish what only Christ can accomplish in us.

And so now we can only speak of sacrifice, not as an act or an offering to appease God or gain his favor, but as an act of response to God's love. It is not for God that we sacrifice, but for ourselves; as St. Augustine recognized centuries ago, "doubtless for our profit, not his own." But I think our resistance to the idea of sacrifice comes at just this point, that we are afraid that we will lose more than we will gain from it, since we are not gaining recognition or advantage or favor. All that we gain from our sacrifice is our freedom. We are realizing freedom when, of our own free will, we lay down or give over what the world says we need to provide for our life and our security, because we come to know that our true help is only in the Lord, who provides all that is needed. We are called to be wise and not foolish, to be sure, but it is not foolish to be extravagant in love and sacrifice, for there is nothing more extravagant than God's love for us in Christ.

This is the work I think we are called always to be about, in all seasons of our lives, this attentive work, attentive to the movement and stirrings of new life in our souls. I invite us into a time of attentiveness in this season, to pay

attention to the promptings of the spirit within you – to consider in your own life not just what you can “afford” to give of yourself and your resources for the sake of your church and its future, but, beneath that, where that greater freedom is to be found for you.

One of the things I am asked to do as your pastor in this campaign is to share, along with others over the next few weeks, my and my family’s process in moving toward our own commitment. As many of you know, my wife Karen’s church, where she is pastor, is going through this same process just now, utilizing the same capital campaign program, even sharing the same consultant. So, we are both doing this. As we have prayed about this and discussed it, a couple of things have been clear for us so far. One is that we haven’t been intentional enough in our giving in the past, and that really looking at the patterns of our life together – our time, our work, our priorities – some things have opened up that we hadn’t really seen before because we weren’t looking. We’ve been very busy, like many of you are, lots of evening meetings. As a result, some evenings it’s just easier to go out for dinner. As we talked about it our conversation expanded and we started to ask ourselves questions like, what if we were more intentional about food, about entertainment, about how we shop (going once a week instead of several times, saving fuel and time), about eating more simply and healthfully? And as we looked at costs involved in these personal lifestyle patterns, averaging them out over a year, adding just a little more, we are getting very close to a tithe of our income. This is what we have decided to do. We haven’t come up with the final figure yet, but we will, and we’ll be dividing this evenly between our two churches over the next three years.

Life conspires to move us from appetite to appetite. In our consumer culture we are so easily caught up in the ease and convenience that can be bought for a price that we forget there are things that are more important, and provide deeper joy, than making life easier for ourselves. This pushes us toward sacrifice as an intentional approach toward life. Without sacrificing our growth as a community of welcome, a community of learning, a church that worships with wonderful music and faithful liturgy, open to new things while rooted in the best of Christian tradition – all of this is thrown into doubt. We need to go deeper than the worldly attitude that life is dictated by what is strictly affordable and reasonable, but rather guided by the faith that is made alive by hope, by reaching and striving and yearning, and giving. Just so we will know that the kingdom of God is not just a vague concept but is recognized in the midst of a people who have given themselves to that more certain reality, that life abundant, which comes from God alone, that is seen in the life and death

and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is our hope and our sure salvation. Unto him be the glory, now and forever. Amen.



Seasons of Sacrifice: Spring Thaw

Devotion: *Romans 12:1-8*

Therefore, I urge you brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God-this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to a pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is-his good, pleasing and perfect will.

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.

The line on Presbyterians over the years is that they are known as God's "frozen chosen." It's been a way that Presbyterians have made fun of ourselves, sort of the family joke that's funnier when we're telling it on ourselves than when others are telling it on us. Among other things, what it means to be called God's "frozen chosen" is that we're the branch of the Christian family who would rather say "ahmen" than "amen;" whose primary posture at worship is sitting still, standing only for the hymns, maybe swaying a little bit, but certainly not get so carried away so far as to actually move one's feet. Tight more than loose, head more than heart; white bread all the way.

Well, I think that's actually breaking down more and more these days. Aside from it always being more a caricature than reality, it is also true that more and more people in churches like ours are coming from backgrounds other than Presbyterian, and often with little or no religious background at all. Even for those of us who have been part of the Presbyterian family our whole lives, we wouldn't still be at it if our hearts were not touched along the way. Phrases like "all things decently and in order" sound so containing and stifling these days. Don Byers reminded me a while back of another phrase, which I believe goes back to John Calvin himself, and that is "ardor and order," that there is a balance to be struck somehow between the two. And if we have been more about order than we have about ardor (makes us nervous), there is today among many a greater desire for "ardor," that it's not just about what you believe - but how you feel it, how you express it - or, that it makes you feel, leads you to express not just in the right words, but with your hands and your feet and your whole body.

So, to the degree that it has been frozen, I think things are thawing out in the old Presbyterian icehouse.

A renewed interest in "spirituality" is also part of this thawing - the yearning for a faith that in Henri Nouwen's words, descends "from the mind to the heart." This is all to the good, or it can be if we don't forget that it is also important what you believe, that we stay clear that our experience cannot be the final measure of the truth, because, our Presbyterian forebears would also remind us, the human heart and mind is a veritable "factory of idols." When Moses went up the mountain to receive that commandments of the Lord, and the Israelites were getting restless and tired of waiting so long for him to come back down the mountain, Moses' brother Aaron led them in an ecstatic religious dance around a hunk of gold that they had shaped in the image of a calf. It must have felt really good to them, to break loose from that oppressive waiting and adopt the methods of the culture

all around them that said how you get action from your gods. But it was all about their ecstasy, and nothing about the true God, Yahweh.

Regardless of our worship forms or our experience of spirituality, we still have to contend with what lay at the core of our faith, and that is the transformation of the human mind and heart for the sake of the beloved community that God intends; to live in accordance with God's will and not our own, or more accurately, that our will would become more and more aligned with God's will. We are speaking in these weeks of "sacrifice," of giving up, letting go, of handing over something that is important to you for the sake of something that is more important. God does not need or demand our sacrifice, but it is rather a response of our lives and our resources, a participation in the self-sacrifice of Christ, a conscious and intentional response – to give of ourselves, not out of our abundance, but in a way that actually costs you something. We are speaking of it in terms of the seasons of the year, which reflect the seasons of our lives and frame them within the cycle of life and death and rebirth.

We began with "winter" as the season of stillness and quietness, when life moves inward. We viewed this as a metaphor for the life that stirs beneath the surface of our visible lives, of how we need to be attentive to those stirrings, for that is where the work of new and transformed life has to take hold if it is to grow. And so now we come to the "spring" of sacrifice, to begin to identify what is emerging, what needs to emerge in our lives, yours and mine, emerge in our lives and from our lives in terms of sacrificial living, sacrificial giving – which amounts to the same thing.

As surely as winter gives way to spring, so there must be a thawing or a warming, where what we have considered in the depth of our hearts would begin to show in our lives. The Apostle Paul wrote, in one of his most sublime verses in his most sublime letter, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed but the renewal of your minds, that you may prove (or "show") what is the will of God, what is good, and acceptable, and perfect." You see, we are not to live as someone once described, as "practical atheists," living as if what we believe as Christians makes no practical or identifiable difference in our lives. For those who have died and been raised with Christ, Paul says, "this age" can no longer provide the regulating principle of life. We've got to be transformed creatures, not just changing our mind about things (though that may be part of it) but our whole life, our whole orientation toward the world, which, as transformed creatures we can see is no longer just of this age but contains within it the seeds of the kingdom of God.

Clarence Jordan talked about this kind of transformation as like the process of metamorphosis, the changing form of a caterpillar into a butterfly. What is the caterpillar's life like? He plods along, putting one leg after another and after another and after another - moving all in order until he gets, gradually, where he needs to go. He's quite limited, that caterpillar is, by his shape and form. But he is content, if he can stay clear of human feet - he is what he is. But as his transformation sets in his form changes, he sprouts wings and begins to fly - it's a whole new life.

It's like that, Clarence said. Life that is not weighed down, limited by the agenda of this age that wants your soul but can't give you freedom, not the kind of freedom that those who have died and been raised with Christ realize. You see, "this age" is about acquiring and protecting, about securing a place. It is as it is, and though there can be significant happiness and fulfillment in it, it is fleeting at best. There is always a better way, a more recent model, and this age is quite adept at moving from one to the other and pushing aside those who are in the way. In the end, the powers of this world, this conforming, non-transformed world, control through fear and are the enemy of real and lasting hope. Transformed life is unencumbered life - not trouble free, not even worry free - but life that has felt the breeze of the Spirit beneath its wings, known the free-flight of the children of God. As in the words of the old spiritual, "Sometimes I feel discouraged, and think my work's in vain. But then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again."

But before we're flying too high, I want to bring us back to that tender shoot of sacrifice that is emerging, or needs to emerge, in our lives. Sacrifice, in the sense of our Christian stewardship, is a sign of transformed life. We struggle with it, precisely because growth is uncomfortable. To be "conformed to this world" in our stewardship is to be guided by conforming words like realistic, reasonable, reachable, achievable. But Paul did not write, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, to present your bodies as a 'reasonable' sacrifice . . ." But rather, ". . . present your bodies as a 'living' sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God." We are to be guided not by conforming words but by transforming words - not what is realistic but what can be imagined; not what is reasonable but what is hoped for; not what is reachable or achievable but what is dreamed about and longed for. Who knows where it will lead? We've got to give God something to work with, something he can make "holy and acceptable" to God's own self. If we "hold back" in our lives, God doesn't have anything to work with because it's all under our control. We determine the outcomes, and we can be assured that only our lowest projections will be met.

It is holiness that we should seek, above all else. The way to holiness is

the way of self-surrender, the way of sacrifice. What is growing within you that is moving you toward a more holy life, a freer life, a life of joy, framed by love? Whatever it is, I can guarantee you it isn't something you need to have but something you need to give. To the glory of God. Amen.



Seasons of Sacrifice: Summer Fullness

Devotion: *John 1:14-18*

The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father full of grace and truth.

John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, "This is he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' " From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, had made him known.

I was reluctant to give up on summer this year, I always am. In this

part of the world summer is the time when life moves outside, if not literally then figuratively. We move “out” from being surrounded all the time by walls, hemmed in by rooms – out to where it feels like we are somehow supposed to be, like our brother and sister creatures in the rest of the animal world, as St. Francis might put it. The glory of God’s creation is evident in every season to those with eyes to see, but summertime is when it is all out there. Gardens arrive at their ripest, trees and shrubs reach the peak of their yearly growth. The earth is full, and we who are part of it receive from the earth’s fullness. We receive our food, and we receive the fullness of our senses - the aromas of blooming flowers and plants, the feeling of carpets of grass on our bare feet, the shelter of trees from the heat of the sun.

In the last two weeks I have suggested that the seasons of the year provide a helpful way for us to see our own lives of faith and what God desires of us and for us. Specifically, we are speaking of “sacrifice,” a posture toward life which acknowledges that though our tendency is to want to keep and hold on to what is ours, a richer, fuller life is to be found in letting go and giving what is ultimately not our own, but gifts from the hand of our loving creator. We began with “winter” as the season of stillness and quietness, when life moves inward. We viewed this as a metaphor for the life that stirs beneath the surface of our visible lives, of how we need to be attentive to these stirrings, for that is where the work of new and transformed life, of sacrificial living, has to take hold if it is to grow. Spring is the season of transformation, when the work of love and sacrifice begins to emerge in our lives, like the shoot of a plant that breaks through the crust of the earth, or like the caterpillar that emerges from his cocoon with a new form, ready for a new and transformed life.

As we move now to the consideration of the summer of sacrifice, I am struck mostly by this sense of “fullness,” of growth reaching its peak just before the harvest, of lush landscapes – and I was turned toward the gospel of John, just after the beginning, where the gospel writer speaks of Jesus as the fullness of God’s grace and truth, and that from his fullness we have received grace upon grace. Jesus is God’s summer among us! God is entirely “out there” through the life of the son. God holds nothing back, but in Christ God’s love is fully shown and given to the world: the lushness of his forgiveness, the fragrance of his mercy, the ripeness of his love. And we, as fellow children of God, brothers and sisters of Jesus, have received from that fullness “grace upon grace.”

If sacrifice is giving up, letting go, giving over something that is important to you for something that is more important, then, as we have said in the last two sermons, sacrifice is something that must be intentional on our part.

Sacrificial giving, which comes from living sacrificially, is something that is arrived at through a spiritual journey that takes us through our own resistance to it. It acknowledges that growth in living faithfully and sacrificially is not and cannot be an easy thing, because growth of any kind is not accomplished without discomfort and sometimes even pain. A year that begins in the quiet stirrings of life beneath the surface, that emerges in new and hopeful growth into the living of our days, now grows into maturity in the season just before the harvest.

If we are to realize the life that receives “grace upon grace”, we have to come out from behind the walls and out of the rooms that we have constructed to keep us safe and secure, and test our wings in the fresh air and open spaces of God’s love. We cannot truly live sacrificially if our world, the world over which we exercise control, is confined only to what is reasonable and realistic in our own minds. When we sacrifice we are giving God something to work with, something over which we have given up control because it has not come out of our abundance, but from the substance of our lives that we had considered necessary for our own security. We are leaving our own little houses of faith and offering our own lives and resources to what God would accomplish in us and through us for the work of the kingdom.

It is very much like that wonderful image that C.S. Lewis offers when he tells about how he invited God into his life. He thought of it like acquiring the services of a contractor to come into your house and make a few improvements. A new closet here, a little more room there, repair a few stairs maybe. But no, when God came into his “house,” he completely remodeled the place, adding rooms, opening up the ceiling and putting a cupola up there.

Our Lord, it seems, is very much interested in having followers who are living “expanded” lives, lives that are enlarged by our openness to the Lord who will respond to our invitation to come into our “house;” but we shouldn’t pre-determine the outcome of that engagement, for God has greater plans for us than our own small vision often allows.

How does a spirit of sacrifice mature in us so that we might come to that point we find it to be life-giving and faith-growing? I think it is the result of a meeting between the fullness of God and the emptiness that we bring to it. There is no better scriptural illustration than the meeting between Jesus and the rich young man who came to him asking what he must do to inherit eternal life. That he had followed the commandments of God his whole life said to Jesus that he was well on his way. Keep at it, Jesus said, and you will live. He had reached a certain level of maturity in his faith. But he was even

more mature in acknowledging to Jesus that this was not enough. It was not enough simply to keep the religious laws, as difficult as that is. He knew there had to be more, something that his own achievements in righteousness to that point could not deliver. Because he pressed the point, Jesus told him that there was one thing he lacked - to go and sell everything he had and give the money to the poor and come follow him. He knew Jesus was right; he also knew that he couldn't do it - so he went away sorrowfully.

For us the options are seldom so clear, nor so extreme. We aren't characters in a biblical story, yet our own lives are reflected there. And it is indeed a sign of maturity when we are able to come to the Lord in the recognition that our own efforts are not enough to ensure the fullness of life that is God's salvation. We too ask what more we can do to ensure it, and it would be a good exercise for each of us, I think, to consider what in Jesus' response to us would make us walk away sorrowfully. Perhaps that is where God is working on us.

What the rich young man missed, apparently, was the "fullness of grace and truth" that was standing in front of him. What we do is vitally important, before and after that meeting between his fullness and our own emptiness. But listen again to the options that Jesus put before him: keep obeying the commandments; sell everything you have and come follow me. In the young man's mind the first wasn't enough, the second was too much. Jesus knew what he needed, and I think we are safe in confessing that God probably knows what we need better than we do ourselves, and for us to discover what that is we need to be open to possibilities we had not even considered before. This requires our looking with different eyes at our own lives, our own resources, eyes that have seen the fullness of grace and truth in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, who helps us to see in ways we had not seen before, who helps us to know what new directions we might go, if we're willing to risk sometimes getting lost along the way (which all of us do). We receive his fullness, John tells us, "receive" it. To receive something you have to take hold of it, or else you can't actually receive it. It is there for each of us, this "grace upon grace." That means gift upon gift, so that in our receiving we are inspired first in our giving. You want to find life? Jesus asks all of us - give. You want to find eternal life, fullness of life, salvation life? - give sacrificially.

We have this on good authority. It is the experience, the testimony of those whose lives have been changed by the "Word (that) became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth." It is not some theological speculation, but the living witness of regular people across the centuries who have met the

Lord in their emptiness and come to know his fullness. They are not perfect, not extraordinarily gifted, most of them. They are simply the saints of God, like you and me - believers who know enough to know their need for God, and who know their own limits do not determine what God can do through them -- that God can grab hold of their life and make it new and set it on the course of salvation, and that the difference they can make because of all this could not otherwise even be imagined.

Receive, take hold of, the fullness of grace and truth that is here for you today. See what it asks of you, where it leads you, what it leads you to give, what joy it brings you. Amen.



Seasons of Sacrifice: Fall Harvest

Devotion: 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Remember this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As is written:

“He has scattered abroad his gift to the poor, his righteousness endures forever.”

Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God’s people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, with them and with everyone else. And in their prayers for you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Fall is a time of arrival, a time of completion, when the earth has come full cycle and done its work through seasons of cold silence (winter), of new life emerging and beginning to grow (spring), of full growth blossoming (summer). And in the fall the harvest comes. In a few weeks we'll be singing of it in that great hymn of thanksgiving, "First the blade, and then the ear, then the full corn shall appear, Lord of harvest, grant that we wholesome grain and pure may be." Poets, composers, and even preachers have always found – as does scripture itself – the grace of God in the rhythm of the seasons. The movement of the human heart in relation to it is the movement toward thanksgiving; and out of thanksgiving emerges a generous heart, for the harvest of God's faithfulness cannot be contained, but must be shared, which produces even more thanksgiving. This is not automatically so, but if it isn't, there is something that is impeding or diverting the flow of life within us, the rhythm on which is based the music of God's gracious gifts to the earth and to our lives.

It is not at all unusual that this should happen. There is illness and there is death of loved ones. There are times when life seems taken over by one distraction after another, one burden on top of another, and that which is most important to us can get lost and we can forget even how to look for it. There are times when there seems to be no room at the center of our lives for anyone but ourselves. We get out of step with God's gracious rhythms, out of meaningful connection with our world and even with those closest to us. We are unable to give thanks, and not seeing the generosity of God, our hearts shrink with our hopes to the size of our expectations.

Last Sunday I spoke of how our Lord apparently wants his followers to have and to lead expanded and expansive lives, and we looked at the story of the rich young man in the gospels who had everything you could possibly want, including a strong faith that kept all the commandments. But in the end, he lacked one thing. He was unable to give, truly give, which meant that he was unable to give thanks. Thus, he walked away, sorrowfully.

All that has happened to this point has been preparation. In considering Seasons of Sacrifice, we began with "winter" as the season of stillness and quietness, when life moves inward, viewing this as a metaphor for the life that stirs beneath the surface of our visible lives, of how we need to be attentive to these stirrings, for that is where the work of new and transformed life, of sacrificial life, has to take hold if it is to grow. "Spring" is that time of transformation when the work of love and sacrifice begins to emerge in us,

making us ready for new and transformed life. “Summer” is the time of fullness of growth and is a metaphor for the “fullness of grace and truth” that is Christ in us. We have arrived, then, at the time of harvest, the time of taking up and giving from the fruits of sacrifice that have grown in us.

It is true with most things, I think, that it is mostly about the preparation. I never minded taking tests in school because the hardest part was all the studying you had to do in order to take the test. On the athletic field the well-conditioned and well-practiced athletes can just relax and “let it go” once the contest actually starts because they have truly prepared. It is the same with the musician, whose talent can shine because she has put so many hours into preparing for the performance. For Christians and their giving it is no different. What I have hoped to do over these last weeks is to offer a kind of frame through which to see and consider the process of arriving at an important decision regarding our financial stewardship. It is not about the amount given, but about the faith and the faithful work that is behind the decision and the act. The harvest takes care of itself if the work has been done carefully and thoroughly. If prayer has been at the heart of it; if you have felt challenged and stretched, no matter the place from which you started; if you have considered the needs of the church alongside the other important needs that present themselves to us in life – then the gifts that flow will be gifts that come from thankful hearts, the kind of thankfulness that comes through and out the other side of that spiritual work. God has been involved, and God never depletes our lives, but only fills our lives.

God fills us through our giving, our offering of our lives and our resources for the work of God’s redemptive love. Through it we are made part of that “endless song that hails a new creation.” It is not us alone, not my gift alone, but all of us together, gifts not equal in size but equal in sacrifice, that make for a true thank offering unto the Lord.

When Jesus invited those who would follow him to lay down, set aside, give up or turn over livelihood, wealth, family concerns, business concerns, it was only because he knew that God had plans to fill them up with love and mercy and peace and forgiveness - and that there had to be room in their lives for these things. He was catching them up in, and equipping them for, the movement and the flow of God’s life in the world, which they could see in him. Like us, they didn’t always have an easy time of it, and didn’t always understand it. He would say incredible and outlandish things that have always been easy to ignore as unrealistic or idealistic. Yet we have discovered that it is only in heading in the direction that Jesus’ words and actions lead us that true life is to be found. It is only forgiving that we can know forgiveness; it is only in loving that we can

know love; it is only in serving that we can exercise true leadership; it is only in giving that we truly receive, grace upon grace.

The Apostle Paul, for a significant portion of his ministry, was engaged in gathering a collection for the poor in Jerusalem. It became an important priority for him - for a couple of reasons. It would provide relief for the impoverished church in Palestine, it would also serve as an expression of solidarity between the newly established Gentile churches and the largely Jewish church in Palestine. At a critical stage in the gathering of this offering, Paul learned that the Corinthians were dragging their feet. We don't know why, but Paul was working hard, bringing to bear all the logical and theological arguments he could muster, to appeal to their generosity. He reminded them of a few things that they had doubtless heard before. He appealed first to the principle of return: sow sparingly and you will reap sparingly; sow bountifully and you will reap bountifully.

He also observed with them that their generosity could not be forced, but had to be voluntary, not a matter of compulsion, but of their own free will. He told them of the voluntary generosity of the Macedonian churches, which could scarce afford to be generous, but who insisted that they be given the opportunity to give!

Paul mentioned the generosity of God as well, of God's capacity to provide for our needs, and do so abundantly, so that we can be equipped for good works. This was important, as Paul was pointing out a close connection between faith and generosity. You see, we may withhold our goods and our money to protect ourselves and preserve our way of life - but to do so implies that our preservation is in our own hands. To let go of our possessions becomes an expression of faith because it symbolizes the commitment of ourselves and our future to someone other than ourselves - to God. To hold on to our possessions symbolizes our doubts in God's ability to provide.

Finally, and I think most importantly, Paul says that generosity produces thanksgiving. Any act of charity benefits the one in need - but benefit also comes to the free-hearted giver, and through it God's abundance is opened up even more. But in addition to this, God will be honored - acts of generosity "produce thanksgiving to God," Paul writes. They "overflow with many thanksgivings to God." Why is this so important to Paul? It is not as if God needs our prayers and acknowledgments. It is rather that for Paul such acts express the right kind of faith, faith in God as Creator. As far as Paul was concerned, the capacity to give thanks is the sign of true faith because it recognizes

who is the creature and who is Creator, as he ends this section of his letter with the words, “Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift.”

Thank God for the harvest, the harvest of the earth, the harvest of righteousness, the harvest of your sacrifice, as I end with the words of poet and preacher Arnold Kenseth in a portion of one of his canticles: Surely your harvest is in our hearts; And your joy is in us, tumbled high, pressed down, and running over. Blessed are your hands upon this day and blessed are all seasons. Amen.

Faithfulness Received, Faithfulness Returned

Capital Campaign 2021

This fall we start our third and final capital campaign. The approach to our Faithfulness Received, Faithfulness Returned campaign is the same as in our earlier campaigns. It is based on God's vision for our church, and our prayers to determine meaningful and joyful sacrifices that can make this vision a reality.

This final campaign of our Ministry Expansion Project is aimed at reducing the debt that CMPC has taken on to complete this bold vision.

Together let us prayerfully consider what sacrifices God is asking us to make on behalf of CMPC's ministries and her future. Through this challenge we can receive God's Faithfulness and respond in Faithfulness.

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