

Thanksgiving, Stewardship, and Offering

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One cannot be on the Christian faith journey very long before encountering the essential concepts of offering, thanksgiving and stewardship. As soon as you begin reading the Bible regularly you encounter these words. I suggest that is an indication of how important they are in our journey of faith. Beyond the wider Christian journey, they are also important to us who follow the rule of St. Benedict.

“Offering” is the oldest of these words, and is mentioned first in the book of Genesis in regard to Cain and Abel and to seal the final agreement between Jacob and Laban. It becomes important to us when it is next mentioned in Exodus 22:29 within the context of the Covenant Code which comes after the Ten Commandments. The text is: “You shall not delay to make offerings from the fullness of your harvest and from the outflow of your presses.” and further in Ex 23:19a “The choicest of the first fruits of your ground you shall bring into the house of the Lord your God”(NRSV). From the earliest time of our recorded tradition, God has commanded that offerings are an important part of the covenant relationship with his people. Although thanksgiving is not specified in these texts, the “fullness of your harvest and outflow of your presses” suggests an abundance for which you would be thankful. At the same time the people are commanded to bring the best of the first part of the harvest to offer to God who gives all things to us. The total amount of text given over to specifying amounts and types of offerings that have been preserved within the first five books of the Old Testament are an indication of how important this concept is in the revelation story, and it continues to be stated in the New Testament. In the synoptic gospels Jesus tells the healed leper to go, show himself to the priests and make the offering that Moses commanded for his healing.

A “steward” is one who cares for the property of another. Humans are mentioned as stewards in Genesis when the man and the woman are charged by God to care for the Garden of Eden. From the beginning God desired that people see God as the Lord of everything and themselves as the manager’s of God’s creation. This theme is actually encountered more in the New Testament than the old. Such a caretaker was apparently familiar to people in Christ’s day. Jesus himself refers to stewards several times in his parables (Luke 16:1-13, Luke 19:12-27, Matthew 21:33-46, etc.). The idea of the Christian as a steward of what God has given to him is also developed in the epistles. In I Corinthians 4:1-2 Paul says “Think of us this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries”. In the letter to Titus a bishop is described as “God’s steward” and the qualities he should possess are listed. In I Peter chapter 4 the writer addresses himself to the need for believers to be “good stewards of the manifold grace of God”(vs. 10). In short, as God’s people we are to be caretakers of creation, and God’s good news to the world.

“Thanks” and “Thanksgiving” are certainly words that any Christian encounters frequently within scripture. The Psalms especially speak of thanksgiving in any and all circumstances. In Leviticus chapter 7 verses 11 to 17 gives early detailed instructions regarding a thank offering. An extensive prayer of praise and thanksgiving is David’s Psalm of Thanksgiving (I Chronicles chapter 16:7 – 36). There are numerous citations in the New Testament, but perhaps the most notable in the Gospel would be the Magnificat, and the last supper, when Jesus gives thanks for the wine. Taken together it could be said that the person of faith is called to live with thanksgiving, acknowledging that “all things come of thee O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee.”

Our Benedictine vows call us to follow through. In obedience we are called to follow God’s commandments as we understand them in the tradition. In stability we must take stock of our situation where we are now and make a decision. In conversion of life, we called to work toward proportional giving. For those in vowed life and oblation, this means growing towards a gift of up to 5% of our after-tax annual income.

In making a pledge – a promise to support – to the Companions of St. Luke, these three concepts are interwoven like a braid. Creation is everything around us, including our lives and our material resources, which is the only part of creation that we have any real control of. God has appointed us as stewards of creation from the beginning of salvation history (Genesis). A steward is to take care of another’s possession as if it were his own. Starting from the beginning of God’s covenant with Israel the people were commanded to make an offering back to God of what God had given them in the harvest. Most of us don’t have a grain harvest, but we do have a salary which is our modern equivalent. Whatever God has given us is good, and we need to express our thanks for these good gifts. Our tradition tells us that the way to say thank you to God is to return a portion of the gift to him. In particular, the tradition informs us that the gift of offering should be the “choicest of the first fruits”.

In conclusion, how does this relate to us? We own nothing. Everything we have is a gift from God. We are grateful for God's gifts and wish to express our thanks. God calls us to express our thanks by making an offering back to him of a portion of the gifts he has given us. This may be expressed in many ways, but the first step to show thanksgiving for the gift of the Companions of St. Luke, the appropriate offering is a pledge of regular, continuing monetary support to help sustain the community in its ministry.