



First United Church of Oak Park

Of Equal Worth
Leviticus 5:1-13; Luke 2:21-24
The Rev. John Edgerton
January 5, 2020

They brought the child up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord and they made an offering according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.'

It's an easy detail to miss, this offering at the temple. In a story filled with angels and prophecies and miraculous births, one could be forgiven for overlooking this parenthetical aside about Mary and Joseph's adherence to the law of the Lord. But this brief story about an ordinary offering points toward an ethic of Christian generosity, in this brief story we see laid out in miniature how Christians are to relate to money.

Let's back up. When the gospel of Luke states: they made an offering according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons,' the law being referred to is from the book of Leviticus. The book of Leviticus recounts a period of time when the people of God were in the wilderness, the entire nation living in tents and sojourning toward the promised land, but they had not reached it yet. They were utterly reliant on the blessings of God to keep them safe. Food, water, safety, purpose, future, the people needed God to provide all of this for them. The people needed to be in God's good graces if they expected to be able to make it through the wilderness.

And a part of that is that the people were supposed to make offerings to God. Offerings of valuable goods that would be brought to the priests to be laid on the altar and burned, offered up in fire and smoke to God. This would be done regularly—to mark important occasions like the birth of a child or recovery from a serious illness or just at important times of the year, people were required to bring offerings to God. Giving offerings is what it took to stay in God's graces.

It's a bit unseemly, this idea of God being in the offering taking business. If divine blessings are contingent upon making offerings, then will greater blessings come to those who brought forward more valuable offerings?

We read earlier in this service a selection from Leviticus, chapter 5. It's very typical of the book and lays out the details for an important but ordinary kind of offering. It states that I'm supposed to bring to the priests an offering, a whole lamb or a goat. That's a very valuable offering to bring. I would only be able to do that if I owned a large amount of livestock. But after I made the offering, I could rest assured that I had done a good thing and I was in God's good graces.

But that's a problem. Only the well-to-do would own any livestock at all, much less many of them, and even for the well-to-do, giving a whole lamb or goat would be a generous offering. But what about for everyone else? Were only the well-to-do afforded the chance to be in God's good graces? Is it really true that the law of God states that what God requires is expensive stuff?

The book of Leviticus continues, and speaks directly to this question.

If I couldn't afford a whole lamb, the law states that I am supposed to bring an offering of a pair of turtledoves. This starts to be much more accessible. Small birds like that could be bought in any market for a modest sum. But still for an ordinary family, this would be a generous offering, requiring I have money in my pocket to spend or valuable goods to trade. In order to make an offering of a pair of turtledoves, I have to have some wiggle room in my finances. But after I made the offering, I could rest assured that I had done a good thing and I was in God's good graces.

But there's a problem. Not everyone would be able to afford even this much. Only those doing relatively well would be able to go the market and buy live animals—even small animals like birds. What about everyone else? What about those who were living day to day? Were those of very limited financial means unable to be in God's good graces? Does the Law of God state that the injustices of poverty are mirrored in divine attitudes toward poor people, too?

The book of Leviticus continues, and speaks directly to this question.

If I can't afford a whole lamb—which is most people, and if I can't afford turtledoves—which is still many people—then the law states that I may bring one tenth of an ephah of flour as an offering. But after I made the offering, I could rest assured that I had done a good thing and I was in God's good graces.

On the off-chance that one among us has forgotten the conversion rates on an ephah of flour, one tenth of an ephah would be 2 pounds of flour, worth something like a \$1.80. It's enough to make several loaves of bread. Not particularly valuable even 30 centuries ago in any absolute sense. But for anyone for whom "give us this day our daily bread" was a very literal prayer, a tenth of an ephah of flour would be a generous gift.

That's what the law says; the life of faith calls upon me to regularly bring offerings to God. That offering is to be a whole lamb, or if I can't afford that a pair of turtledoves, or if I can't afford that a couple pounds of flour. Anyone who brought forward an offering that was generous for them, then they could rest assured of being in God's good graces. It makes no matter to God that a whole lamb would be worth many times more than two turtledoves. It makes no difference that a whole lamb is worth a hundred times more than a tenth of an ephah of flour. The Law of God states that they all have the same spiritual worth. All of these offerings fulfill the same spiritual purpose and are of equal worth as far as God is concerned.

That brings us back to Jerusalem, back to Mary and Joseph, back to the Christ child. Luke, chapter 2, "They brought the child up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord and they made an offering according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.'" If it were really true that what God required was expensive stuff, then this dedication of Jesus in the temple would be sorely lacking. But when Jesus was dedicated at the temple, it was not with the most valuable offering possible—it was not with a lamb, or gold, or with rivers of olive oil, or with a fatted calf. Jesus' family offered what was for them a generous gift. Two turtledoves is what they offered in thanksgiving for the birth of Jesus. Not lavish in any absolute sense, but generous, and we still can read about that generosity today.

This story, of Jesus dedicated in the temple, points toward a whole ethic of Christian generosity. In this brief story, we see laid out in miniature how Christians are to relate to money. As Christians, generosity is one of the core spiritual disciplines of our faith. It should mark us as a people, make us stand out. We should be known for generosity.

Because, of course, God has no use for burnt offerings. God has no need of a lamb or turtledoves or flour. And everything on the earth belongs to God anyway, so to say that I am offering something to God is a bit

like when my daughter hands me a Ziploc bag and says “here, dada, I brought you some Cheerios.” To which I say thank you, and I am honestly glad to be given. . . my own Cheerios.

God has no need for burnt offerings—no need for lambs or turtledoves of flour or Cheerios or dollars or cents. What God has use for is generous hearts. What God needs is for people to share with one another and be generous. Because a world filled with people with generous hearts would know neither hunger nor want nor cruelty.

A world filled with people with generous hearts would know neither hunger nor want nor cruelty.