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### III. Why Do We Worship the Way that We Do, Part III – Praise and Pledging, Song and Stewardship

(Psalm 150 NRSV) "Praise the LORD! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty firmament! 2 Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his surpassing greatness! 3 Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! 4 Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! 5 Praise him with clanging cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals! 6 Let everything that breathes praise the LORD! Praise the LORD!"

(2 Corinthians 9:6-11a NRSV) "The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. 7 Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 8 And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. 9 As it is written, "He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever." 10 He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. 11 You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity...."

Have any of you heard this joke? It's a preacher favorite. One Sunday morning, a mother went in to wake her son and tell him it was time to get ready for church, to which he replied, *"No. I'm not going to church today."* *"Why not?"* she asked. *"I'll give you two good reasons,"* he said. *"One, I don't think they like me there, and two, I don't really get a lot out of it."* His mother replied, *"Well, I'll give YOU two good reasons why YOU SHOULD go to church. (1) You're 40 years old, and (2) you're the pastor!"*

***"I don't get a lot out of it."*** You've heard the phrase. You may have said it yourself. I know I have. Or its very similar cousin: ***"That doesn't meet my needs."*** Again, you may have said it and Lord knows I have. In fact, it's hard *not* to think in those terms. For the culture all around us is a needs-driven consumer culture, where you are encouraged by the advertising that assails us 24/7 to use that as the most

important test: *“Will it meet my needs?” “What will I get out of it?”* If you do a Google search on the internet for the phrase *“meet my needs”* the first results are all from advertising: A law firm has an ad encouraging you to make sure that your will meets your needs. A cell phone company assures you that it has plans to meet your needs (it doesn't say, though, that your bill will be completely incomprehensible and will have 57 inscrutable charges on it each month). And – my favorite – there is an ad that came up encouraging me to make sure that I *“Choos[e] A Rubber Stamp That Meets Your Needs.”* I'll keep that in mind, but – I don't know about you – but my needs in the rubber stamp department are really pretty minimal.

The implicit **promise** in these advertising approaches is that if you choose a will or a cell phone or rubber stamps that *“meet your needs”* then you will indeed *“get a lot out of”* the experience. You will be satisfied. You will be at peace. You will be sated. And your life will be better. The Apostle Paul though, had a different perspective didn't he? Did you hear it: *“The point is this,” he wrote the Corinthians: “the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”* Now, two things. First, while God loves a cheerful giver, I have to say that I suspect that God will nonetheless accept the gift of even a grumpy giver. But, secondly and much more importantly, Paul is making an ancient point that is yet so very apt for we who live in the most consumerist, needs-driven, what-can-I-get-out-of-it culture that the world has ever seen. For each and every one of us are influenced by that culture in ways that we hardly even realize. And when, under the influence of that culture, we define our hopes and dreams and our very lives around our *“meeting our needs,”* around the standard of *“what will I get out of it?”* then we have defined those hopes and dreams much too *“sparingly,”* to use Paul's phrase.

“Sparingly.” It’s a striking word, I think. And it fits. For while there is nothing *wrong* with seeking a cell phone plan or a rubber stamp that meets your needs, the reality is that “*meeting your needs*” is an endless cycle. Because next year there will be a cell phone plan or rubber stamp that **better** “*meets your needs*” and yet another one the year after that. It can make you a little crazy. It can insidiously focus you on what you **don’t** have and what you think would make you happier if you **did** have it. And yet when you get it, you discover that you don’t get “*as much out of it*” as you had hoped and so your needs once again seductively call to you, whisper in your ear, promising that if you’ll just satisfy them *one more time* with *one more thing* then that will be enough. But it never is. It never is.

Now, what does all of this have to do with the way that we worship? And, in particular, what does it have to do with our topic for today’s sermon in this series on why we worship the way that we do? -- praise and pledging, song and offering. Well, let me begin to answer that question this way, rather pointedly: *worship is not a consumer event*. It’s not like going to the movies or a play or a concert. It’s not like assessing cell phone plans and rubber stamp options. Some of you know of Pastor Rick Warren whose books The Purpose-Driven Life and The Purpose-Driven Church have sold millions of copies and which have been translated into more than 40 languages. Pastor Warren says, in a rather pointed way, that this is exactly the wrong question when he says “*Worship is not about you.*”<sup>1</sup> No, we ought to come to worship, he says, not with the question “*what can I get out of this*” or “*how will this meet my needs*” but instead asking “*How shall I participate in worship today in order that I might be **changed and***”

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<sup>1</sup>Similarly, Kim Fabricius: “What should we get out of worship? Wrong question. Worship is not a utility but an offering, [it’s] an economy of grace that interrupts... the feverish cycles of production and consumption - which is why the [offering] is not fund-raising but cultural critique.” Quoted at <http://jimorrow.wordpress.com/2007/04/25/what-i-got-out-of-worship>

**transformed?** *In order that I might better reflect and embody the love of God for each and all?"* Do you see how **that** is **such** a different and such a more meaty question than the flabby and thin question about what meets our needs? Because in worship we do something together – for and with God. Today, on this first of our two Stewardship Sundays, we are talking about what we offer to God in our singing and in our financial contributions. For both are really offerings. Let's look at our singing first

Why **do** we sing as a part of worship? Why **is** our singing best understood under the idea that it is in fact an offering? Well, first of all, God tells us to: God tells us to make music with trumpets and lyres, with pipes and strings, with lute and harp and tambourines. And in the late middle ages it became possible to make music with organs and pianos. In Hawaii we discovered that we could add to that list the `ukelele and the slack-key guitar and the sacred hula. For I think what the psalmist is telling us is that indeed our songs and music in worship are not an obligation but an opportunity. An opportunity for what? Well, first of all, to give thanks to God that we have been brought back together. My wife Barbara tells me that in the Iowa United Methodist Church annual conference – the gathering of all the ministers from throughout the state – the first thing that is done is to sing the old hymn, *"And Are We Yet Alive?"* with its powerful words of thanksgiving: *"And are we yet alive? And see each other's face? Glory and thanks to Jesus give, For His almighty grace!"*<sup>2</sup> We may not sing *that* hymn, but Sunday by Sunday that is what we do when we gather: we offer our thanks to God for the week just past and for gathering us together again.

But there is a second answer I would give as to why we worship God with our songs and why that is indeed a kind of offering. The late Professor Charles Hartshorne was a 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher whom I credit with enabling me to try to live out Jesus'

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<sup>2</sup><http://www.cyberhymnal.org/html/a/n/andarewe.htm>

command to love God with all one's *mind*. He wrote powerfully and provocatively about God. But he was also an amateur ornithologist of some note. And he published a book in the 1970s that sought to answer the question of "why do birds sing?" Now, biologists tell us that birds sing as part of their mating rituals. But Hartshorne's study led him to another conclusion as well. He simply said "*Birds sing because they can – and because they enjoy it.*"<sup>3</sup> **Because they enjoy it.** What a wonderful response. God hopes it is the same for us. For, you see, it doesn't matter whether you think your voice is reedy or resonant, weak or warbly, sonorous or soaring, lush or lacking, beautiful or baleful. It doesn't matter because, as Pastor Warren reminds us, worship and singing is not about me, it's not about you. It's about God – it's about opening up to God with enjoyment and enthusiasm in thanksgiving. Not, to use Paul's words again, "sparingly" or stingingly. It is your offering of thanksgiving to God that indeed you are still alive, that indeed you have been abundantly blessed, that indeed you want to give back to the beauty of this world through the voice that God gave you – and that you want to be changed!

Now, though, let me talk about why we have a monetary offering *in* our worship services and why we offer our financial commitments – as we will next Sunday – as part of worship. The reason, in my opinion, that our worship service rightly includes a monetary offering and rightly includes an annual opportunity to bring our financial commitments before God is to remind us, first of all, that our treasure is not in fact our own, that no matter how good a work ethic we have had or however much we have earned our money from honest and respectable labor nonetheless it is God who made it possible for us to do that work, to have that treasure to begin with. As the writer of the

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<sup>3</sup>Private conversation with Professor Hartshorne in 1974. See also <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Born-Sing-Interpretation-Survey-Midland/dp/0253207436>

Book of Deuteronomy puts it *"But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth...."* (Deuteronomy 8:18a NRSV). So our Sunday worship offering, and our annual financial commitment as a part of worship, is a powerful public way of re-affirming that every blessing that we have is indeed from God – it is not just our own doing, no matter what the culture all around us tries to tell us!

But there's another way that having an offering and a financial commitment as a part of our worship service is indeed a criticism of the consumerist, needs-driven culture all around us. Part of the problem with basing what you do or what you give on whether it *"meets your needs"* or on *"what you get out of it"* is that such an attitude inevitably makes you think you are worse off than you really are. I know that I certainly am susceptible to that sort of sin, managing to feel sorry for myself that I don't have the latest and greatest computer, thinking that if only I did then my *"needs would met"* and I would *"get more out of my life."* But giving our offering as a part of **worship** is a reminder that we in this congregation, and virtually any of us who call the United States home, are so much better off than so much of the world in terms of our wealth. Perhaps some of you have seen the very striking piece called *"If the World Were a Village."* The author of this piece – which is based in part on the CIA World Fact Book, of all things! – asks us to imagine that the world is a village of 100 people. If that were the case, and based on the actual situation of the world's inhabitants today, then, statistically, eighty of those people would live in substandard housing. Sixty-seven of them would be unable to read. Fifty – half! – of them would be malnourished. Thirty-three would not have consistent access to safe drinking water. *And five of them would control 32% of the world's wealth – and all five of those would live in the United States.*<sup>4</sup>

These facts are not calls for us to simply feel guilty about our good fortune. Rather, they are the reminder to us that every Sunday we have the opportunity to

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<sup>4</sup>[http://www.familycare.org/news/if\\_the\\_world.htm](http://www.familycare.org/news/if_the_world.htm)

remember these things, to give thanks for the gifts that we have in our lives, to know that we are indeed – even when our financial circumstances are less than we would wish – more fortunate than most of the world, and, most importantly, *to commit ourselves to making this world that God loves a better place for ALL those whom God has made.* And our public, shared offering helps us in our resolve. Because in isolation, it is too easy to say *“Oh, I’m just one person; there’s nothing I can do about these things.”* But when we make our offerings **together**, we are in part saying that **together** we **can** indeed make a difference, together we **can** indeed confront the injustices and inequities of life, together we **can** be a blessing to a world that so needs what we can do. So, our offering, our shared financial commitments are in fact a joyous celebration of both the blessings that we experience and our commitment to help make it so that others would be blessed – and it is our weekly statement together that we expect to be changed and transformed by what we give.

Barbara’s and my youngest daughter Katie has always loved church, ever since she was an infant. One time when she was about five, she turned to me and said: *“Daddy, I wish we could have more worship services?”* I asked her why she wanted to do that. And her response was one I have never forgotten. She said, *“Well, the more worship services we get to have, the more offerings there are, and the more offerings there are, the more we get to give.”* **“The more we get to give.”** That is indeed our opportunity, our exuberant, unstinting, unsparing opportunity Sunday by Sunday by Sunday, in time and talent and treasure, in prayer and praise, in song and thanksgiving. For that privilege, thanks be to God!