

WORK AND WORSHIP

175th Celebration Outdoor Worship

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First Presbyterian Church of Marion, Iowa

Text: Leviticus 2:1-3

Preaching was different in the mid-19th century, back when our church began. For one thing preachers were rather long winded, or perhaps I should say congregations were much more patient back then. It was not unusual for a sermon to go on for an hour to an hour and a half or a worship service to last two or three hours. I believe I am right in assuming you all would prefer that I did not try to duplicate that tradition this morning. Although if any of you are disappointed about that let me know, and I will see what I can do to preach longer in some future sermon.

But among the other characteristics of old time preaching was the practice of taking some weird, obscure passage of the Bible, expounding on it, and shaping it into an inspiring message. This morning, I shall attempt to follow this tradition by using an obscure text from the book of Leviticus. How inspiring this might be remains to be seen.

SCRIPTURE

Leviticus 2:1-3

When anyone presents a grain offering to the Lord, the offering shall be of choice flour; the worshiper shall pour oil on it, and put frankincense on it, and bring it to Aaron's sons the priests. After taking from it a handful of the choice flour and oil, with all its frankincense, the priest shall *burn this as its memorial portion upon the altar*, an offering by fire of pleasing odor to the Lord. And what is left of the grain offering shall be for Aaron and his sons, a most holy part of the offerings by fire to the Lord.

The Word of the Lord... **Thanks be to God!**

SERMON

There is a story about a pastor who once visited an elderly woman in his congregation. Trying to open the conversation, the pastor asked the woman how she spent her day.

"I do a lot of thinking," she answered.

"Oh," the pastor replied, "What do you think about?"

"Well," said the woman, "I spend a lot of time thinking about the hereafter."

"That's wonderful," said the pastor. "It is always uplifting to think about what heaven must be like."

"No, no, no," said the woman. "It's nothing like that. I walk into my bedroom, or the kitchen, or the bathroom, and I think, 'Now what was it I was here after?'"

Today, in this place we are celebrating memories. It is important to remember. It is important to remember who we are and where we have come from. It is important to remember what makes us Presbyterians, what makes us into a congregation. It is important to remember people, names from long ago, like Alexander Marshall, names from more recent times like C.V.R. DeJong, Jean Hauter, or Jay Miller. It is important to remember events, challenges we have faced, as well as major accomplishments. Memory is part of what makes us human.

The Bible talks about memory and remembering. But in the Hebrew scriptures, the word that is usually translated “to remember” is a much stronger word than our modern English term. We normally think of it in terms of a mental activity, bringing to mind the events, people and places of the past. It is recollection or reminiscing. But to the ancient Hebrew people remembering was much more than this. It meant bringing the past into the present so that you can take appropriate action, so that you can do what needs to be done. It is as if whatever you now remember has been stored or set aside, but now you bring it out and take up where you left off.

This Hebrew understanding of what it means to remember helps to clarify the fourth commandment, “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy...” Once a week, we take up where we left off. We remember what God has done for us in the past so that we can do what needs to be done today, here and now, and so that we can have hope for tomorrow. It is not merely a mental activity. It is physical. We gather together to worship God and to remember.

Now it is true that the book of Leviticus is rather obscure and not used very often in preaching. But Leviticus is all about remembering. It describes all sorts of rituals and ceremonies that the Hebrew people were supposed to enact in order to remember all that God had done for them. One of these rituals is found in our text for this morning, where we have instructions for the grain or cereal offering. Now the grain offering was different from the animal sacrifices. This offering was performed after a harvest and the people were instructed to bring a portion of the grain and give it back to God. This was to be done in a spirit of praise and thanksgiving, but also could be accompanied by special requests. So the grain offering was not too different from our weekly “Prayers of the People” where we praise God for the joys in our lives, but also offer up prayers of intercession for our concerns.

The procedure for the grain offering was interesting. You did not merely bring in a bushel of wheat and give it to the priest. You were to take some of the grain and grind it into as fine a flour as you could. The priest would then take some of this flour and mix it with olive oil and frankincense. This mixture then would be burned on the altar. The frankincense was important. Without it, well, it just smelled like the time that fat bagel was jammed in your toaster. It was just burnt toast. But with the frankincense there was a sweet aromatic smell.

This mixture that the priest used was called the memorial portion or the memorial offering. The root of this word in Hebrew is the verb “remember” as in the commandment, “Remember the Sabbath.” Now this is a bit of a puzzle. What is to be remembered and who is doing the remembering? Furthermore, what action is to be taken? What are the people supposed to be doing when they offer up this memorial? It is important to realize that the person who was making such an offering had to put some work into it. The grain had to be harvested, threshed, winnowed, and then ground into fine flour. The grain offering, particularly the flour part, was linked to human labor. It was symbolic of all our human endeavors, but that in itself is never enough. The ancient Israelites remembered every time they made the grain offering that it was God who had given them the land; God who had caused the seed to grow; God who had provided the sun and rain; God who had given them the harvest. No matter how hard they worked, their efforts would be futile, if God was not with them. They needed to remember this. We need to remember this.

But there was another side of the grain offering. It was also meant to be a reminder to God. Now, it was not that God had forgotten anything. One way to explain it is with the other celebration that is going on today, Father's Day. On Father's Day you give Dad a gift, but if it is possible you try to spend some time with Dad. And you might say "Dad, remember the time you took me to the ball game and I caught the fly ball?" Or "Remember that vacation we took out to Yellowstone Park?" Or "Remember when the car broke down in the middle of the blizzard?" It is not that Dad has forgotten any of those things, but together you relive these experiences that deepens the love and the connection you have. That is a little of what was supposed to be going on with this grain offering and God. It was meant to recall important events of the past, so that the covenant, the connection with God was stronger here in the present.

So this is all part of the symbolism of the mixture of flour and frankincense. The flour symbolized hard work. It took human effort, human sweat to produce flour. But what about the frankincense? Any kind of incense, but especially frankincense, always symbolized prayer and worship. That is a powerful combination, hard work and devout worship.

One hundred and seventy-five years ago, nine individuals came together here in Marion to start a new Presbyterian congregation. It wasn't easy. It took them fourteen years before they were able to begin construction on a building that stood right here in this spot. It was around the same time that they were able to afford to pay a full time permanently installed pastor, although some of the records show he wasn't always paid the full amount or paid on time. Nevertheless, with work and worship they persevered, and in 1884 they were able to buy a much bigger lot on the corner of 8th Avenue and 12th Street, and build the sanctuary where we worship today.

So much more could be said of all that has gone on over all these years. Many congregations have flourished but then faded away long before 175 years. Truly we have been blessed by God to have come this far, and of course there have been many factors. But one important reason is that we have always had that mixture of flour and frankincense. We have always had the flour. We work hard, not just to benefit ourselves but to serve others. In our sanctuary one of the smaller stained glass windows is dedicated to the Working Band. Most of us probably don't know what the Working Band was. They were a group of Sunday School girls, 8, 9, 10 years old, who did needlework and other crafts, to make a little money to support a mission school for girls in Africa. This principle of working hard serving others is deeply rooted in our very DNA. It carries down from the Working Band to projects today such as the food pantry, the Helping Hands store, our deep involvement in Marion Cares, the FLY lunch program and Operation Christmas Child. Externally, out in our community, and across the world we work hard serving Christ by serving others.

But we also have the frankincense. The life of our congregation centers around the worship of God each week. We praise God with songs and music. We freely confess our shortcomings, and rejoice in receiving God's amazing grace. We teach the Word of God to the young ones and listen to the Word of God being preached. We pray for each other. We celebrate the sacraments. We join couples together as they commit their lives to each other. We celebrate the end of life on this earth with dignity and compassion. Internally, within the walls of our church, we worship God as we care for and nurture one another.

It is wonderful that we have reached a milestone of 175 years. It is appropriate that we celebrate and praise God for all our blessings. However, there is a caution here as well. Churches are living breathing entities and they can age just like people can age. It is possible for churches to get a little confused, even senile, as the years go by. Just like the elderly woman in my story a church can waste a lot of time wondering about the hereafter.

We at the First Presbyterian Church of Marion cannot and will not allow that to happen. We know what we are here for and what we are here after. We are intent on making our lives and our church a memorial offering that is sweet smelling to God. We shall continue to work hard and worship hard. Our faith is not passive. It is not some sort of mental process we are thinking through. We are not sitting around in rocking chairs and reminiscing. Yes, we appreciate all that has gone on in the past to bring us to this moment, but we do so that we may take action and move forward. We need to remember. We know what we are here after. We will step forward into the future with confidence, inspired and strengthened by God's love and grace. Thanks be to God. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.