

I want to take a moment at the beginning today to extend an expression of appreciation to all of you. I am especially grateful to those of you who have made a financial commitment for the coming year. Your commitment not only makes it possible for us to continue and expand our ministries, to have an influence for the gospel of Jesus Christ in this community. It also provides a context for your own deeper engagement in the basic questions of meaning and purpose that we raise and invite.

Last week something happened that caught me up short. A young man, not more than eight or nine years of age, came up to me at the door at the end of the service with a Christmas offering envelope. He handed it to me with a big smile, and as I said thank you, I noticed some writing on the envelope that said something like, "I want to help!" In a bit a mother came out and asked me if I had gotten the envelope. She said, "it was his idea, and it was his money." Later, as I placed the envelope in the collection plate on its way to the safe, I opened it and noticed that inside was a twenty dollar bill. I thought, "How many of us gave of our own substance as significantly as that child?" I know I never did when I was a child. My parents gave me a quarter or maybe a dollar to put in the plate—if they remembered. I'll bet a number of you do practice family giving. And so you'll know sometimes it is a little child who leads us.

I later learned a bit more of the story. Apparently this young man was preparing to make a purchase of a Christmas gift later that day and had brought a twenty and several ones with him. He stayed in church for the sermon and was inspired by the preacher Richard Schaper's question: "How much is enough?" It was then that this boy became the Good News he heard. He began writing on the envelope, and then he chose the twenty rather than the ones to put in it. Rather than put it in the plate, he gave it to me personally.

I certainly want to commend this young man for his insight and generosity. But more than that I want to commend his parents for allowing him to take his own initiative, to trust his own motivations, and especially the context the church provides for such a choice. This is certainly a remarkable young man and a remarkable family, and it was a moving sermon. But more than that, it is the presence of God worshipped so reverently and joyfully in this place with amazing music, great preaching, a warm welcome, and a kind of seriousness about the lives of children and youth that engages them with the possibility that their decisions about how to live and care and give really matter. It is this community that practices generosity not so much as a duty, a kind of toll, or even, as we so often experience it, as a source of pride and public esteem, but as an engagement with our search for meaning and our place in a world that calls us to take responsibility for our choices and our actions.

To simply attend church at all has increasingly become a sacrifice for more and more of us. And there are few supports in the community or among our peers for going to worship. It is counter-cultural, and I know many of you have had occasion to have to explain yourselves to your slightly incredulous or even disapproving friends. And certainly there are wonderful benefits that come with church attendance. Where else can you find such wonderful music so

early in the morning? Where else can you be stimulated, made to think in unfamiliar ways? or even find yourself becoming uncomfortable or angry at what you're hearing, and not be able to simply take the remote and change the channel? And where else can you and your children be welcomed with a genuine warmth not because of what you or they can do or have—as is usually the norm in our world—but simply for who you are, for being a human being and a child of God, and so a brother or sister with infinite worth?

But I suspect it is not these things that bring you out on Sunday mornings. I suspect it is what moved this young man. It is a deeper connection that moves you to step out of the crowd to find the source of your own self and your own motivation, your own best expression of the Love that is in you.

So I want to thank you. I want to affirm and acknowledge that striving for an ultimate sense of integrity, an integration of this moment with the you you have been and will be in the future and with the community, the belonging that is provided by your closest relations, your family, friends, and coworkers, but one that doesn't end even there but extends to the last person on earth and even to the earth itself. It's integration with that reality that we yearn for and seek by coming to church.

So take a bit of a breather this week in your hectic approach to the Coming of Christ, hopefully to become mindful of God's "daily visitation," and remember the words from the prophet Isaiah who in describing the "Beloved Community," where the lion and the lamb lay down together, said, "and a little child shall lead them." Indeed, it is not only a little child but it is always the least, the most vulnerable and insignificant in our world who since the Coming of Christ now lead us.

The journey of Advent has taken us by some frightening visions of destruction and judgment. "You brood of vipers, who warned you to escape the wrath that is to come?" John the Baptist. Or the prophet: "He is coming . . . who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?" Even Jesus himself: "People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken." And even here in the familiar words of the Magnificat there is reason for some concern: "He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty."

These words of Mary seem as contemporary as the shouts of protest from the developing world gathered at the global climate summit in Copenhagen. Throughout history the human answer to such fear has always been force, violence and oppression, and we have inevitably blamed our violence on God, demonizing our enemies in order to justify their sacrifice. But according to Hebrews, "when Christ came into the world, he said, 'Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, ... See, I have come to do your will.'"

All we do by turning to violent sacrifice and oppression is to create more violence that has finally caught up with us. This is the judgment we face in climate destruction and global violent conflict it will inevitably lead to as long as we hold on to our power and wealth, to our

prerogatives and privileges, averting our gaze from the destruction our relative comfort is wreaking on to poorest and most afflicted.

I listened to the remarks of Mohamed Nasheed, the president of Maldives, a tiny island nation in the Solomon chain that at two degrees Celsius of continued global warming will be submerged after being ravaged by decades of floods and storms. He is a young man with young children. He said, “I invite the developed countries who created the climate crisis to recognize their responsibility for it. If we continue business as usual, we will not see our grandchildren. I want to see grandchildren. I want them to enjoy the beautiful sandy beaches, the millions of corals that we have. I want them to simply live in their homeland.” A little child has led us before. When Jesus came, he took our judgment on himself. And offered us the vision of the “beloved community” if we would only learn to love and forgive, to refuse violence and dividing of good from bad people by sacrifice. He has done these great things for us and his mercy is on us, if we can but learn to fear him only, and not the loss of our money, our power or our privilege.

It is this vision we come here to connect with, to be renewed by, even when it disturbs us with a call to give more than we thought we could, to serve, and love when we didn’t want to, or didn’t have time. But the identity we connect with as daughters and sons of God, and thus as sisters and brothers of suffering people everywhere, and stewards of the creation, compels us to be the Good News we proclaim.