

SERMON: “ABOUT WORSHIP ... WE GIVE AND GO”

TEXTS: OLD TESTAMENT PSALM 116 AND ISAIAH 6:1-8
NEW TESTAMENT 2 CORINTHIANS 13:11-13

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INTRODUCTION

It happens every year, marks the beginning of a new season. It happens at the grocery store where I shop. I'm there most Friday afternoons. September rolls around and the store gets more crowded. The college students are back. Some shop on their own. Some shop in pairs or in packs.

The ones that stand out are the first-year students. They are not in pairs or packs. They are with their parents. The other students have a basket or one of those small carts. The first-year students have the full-size cart ... and it is packed full. Parents are paying. Sending their child off with everything they need. And maybe a pair of purple and gold overalls.

This morning as we wrap up a series of sermons about worship about why we worship the way we do (the order is intentional) we wrap things up with the end of worship – the sending. I want to hold up that image of parents sending their child off to school with a cart full of groceries and goodies to talk about being sent.

Yes, we will also focus on what we are being sent by God to do – the charge. But today I want you to hear a bit more about the blessing – the benediction. How God doesn't just send us out with a 'to do' list – justice, mercy, walk humbly. God fills our carts, blesses us with what we need. We are sent out with a blessing ... with a blessing. Where else does that happen?

Our service ends with what we call “blessing and sending.” You may also see it listed as “charge and benediction.” You've heard the same one for a decade plus of worship services.

By the way I think Johnny's benediction with “do justice now, love mercy now, walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it,” fits and follows up on the one I use quite well.

The charge is from Micah and the benediction is from Paul, from the second letter to the Corinthians. It is the New Testament passage I choose for today.

**The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.**

I could have gone with many others, ones that focus on what we are sent to do. The great commission from the risen Christ Jesus in Matthew 28 would work. “Go and make disciples of every nation ...”

GOD WITH US

Like I said, I want you to hear a bit more about being blessed

Paul ends all his letters with a blessing. There are lots of different benedictions
They all seek to send the same message. The Great Commission sends
that message when Jesus says in closing “and I will be with you always”

The blessing is that when we go, when we are sent by God ... God goes with us!

We are not on our own, like following Jesus is a do it yourself project.

We go out with God’s blessing, with God in us, around us and amongst us
(and dare I say when we get self-righteous – against us as needed)

A blessing or benediction is a reminder that God is with us

Paul ends his second letter to the Corinthians, a church that has known some
deep and painful division, a church learning by trial and error, this way
with these reminders, with this blessing.

**Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Be restored; listen to my appeal;
agree with one another** (I prefer the translation, “mend your ways” plural;
**live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.
Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you.**

The charge is these first few sentences. And it is particular to them

and the challenges they face (especially the need to mend some fences

and some ways – Okay, that’s not so particular to them, is it? Applies to us too!)

The benediction is that last part. You hear me say it each week

**The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.**

God’s presence with us is described in language we would later describe
as Trinitarian (an expression of God in three persons, yet still one)

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father
and the communion of the Holy Spirit. We go with God

We go with grace, love and communion

Grace, love, communion ... Talk about a full basket!

I need these things with me, upholding me, guiding me

I might actually get some good done (including good trouble)

knowing is that God’s grace is very much for real – I am forgiven.

I can live without worrying about having to get it always right all the time

I go with God’s love. Knowing that I am loved. That gives me courage

I go, we go, in communion with the Holy Spirit. We’re not alone

We are sent out forgiven, loved, empowered and accompanied. Good to go!

Our sending includes a blessing, go with God!

GIVE AND GO

Let me get back to that, about going out with God, later
First, a word from our sponsors. We're used to being interrupted by ads
So, let's talk about the part of the service before the blessing and sending
Let's talk about the offering. Most every service we do includes an offering

We take up an offering not just to support our ministry together
The offering is much more than an ad, a word from our sponsors
It is an act of worship itself – the oldest act of worship really, back to Cain and Abel
It is the most basic act of worship, a response to what God has given us
The psalmist, in our lesson today, says it succinctly

**What shall I return to the LORD for all God's bounty to me?
I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD;
I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all God's people.**

An offering is what we do in response to what God has done for us
It is the answer to the question the psalmist asks ...
"What shall I return to the LORD for all God's bounty to me?"
An offering is how we say 'thank you' to God.

There are lots of ways to make an offering. The children of Israel
offered a part of their harvest, an animal from their flocks
We put cash money in the plate, give online or have a draft from our bank account
We offer our time and talents in the church and the community
Lots of ways to make an offering ... including how we take up the offering

When I went to Ghana as a seminary student I was moved (literally) by how
they took up the offering. No plate passing. You took it up yourself
We went forward, sometimes we danced. I like how, when you go forward,
you are presenting yourself as an offering. It is a practice I have seen
(and walked) in lots of black churches in this country and in this church too

The offering is both an individual and corporate experience - with the music and for me
with my mom (and my wife). Beth (at an art show in Davenport this weekend)
believes in putting money in the plate even though we give with an auto-draft
from our account each month. She always had dollar bills to hand to all our kids
I've seen her pass out dollar bills (for the offering) to other people too

Let me also tell you how my mom made the offering a communal thing
She was passing the plate to the woman next to her, but she wasn't looking
The woman next to her was leaning over to get money out of her purse on the floor
My mom hit that woman with that heavy brass plate right in the head
It made that noise "dong." That was followed quickly by an apology

That was soon followed by two women trying to muffle their laughter
Guess an offering should hurt just a little (a sacrifice)
and evoke a smile or even laughter. God loves a cheerful giver

SUMMARY

We take up the offering after the sermon as a response to being in God's presence, to hearing God's word read and proclaimed. We take up the offering.

We sing and then we go from here to be an offering throughout the week walking our offering forward in a way by talking the talk and walking the walk of following Jesus Christ. We enter to worship, we depart to serve.

I started going to church regularly as a teenager. A friend invited me to church camp. That worship service ended with the sermon, a hymn, then the benediction. Many of us who grew up in the church probably remember that order of worship. It was designed to highlight the sermon and send us out thinking about it.

This order of worship, called "The Service for the Lord's Day" started being used more and more around when I was in seminary. I remember a friend of mine commenting on that shift (especially taking up the offering after the sermon) asking me, "Aren't you worried about the offering being after the sermon? People might treat the offering like a commentary on your sermon."

Now there's a thought ... a shot across the bow (or the pulpit). But full of theological education I answered him saying with some bravado "No, not worried about that. The people's offering is a response to God's work, not to my words."

I still hold to that thought, based on my theology ... and these many years later also based on my own experience of being sent and blessed, sent and blessed, week after week after week.

More and more I realize I give and go and keep on going through tough times because I am now (actually always have been and always will be) that first-year student shopping with my – your – our – their Heavenly Parent moving through the aisles with a cart full of blessings, a cart full of blessings.