



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

19th Sunday after Pentecost: September 30, 2018

Sermon Title: "Offering"

**Sermon Text: Psalm 19:14
with reference to Numbers 11 and Mark 9:38-50**

"Let the words of my mouth and the whispering of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer." That's the final verse of our Psalm today. Have you heard that before? If so, it was probably at the beginning of a sermon. I always felt that was a peculiar thing for a preacher to do if the preacher was using a manuscript. If you only begin praying when you get *here*, then *you're too late*. The time to offer that prayer is long before you climb into the pulpit.

The Psalmist knows this because he's not just praying for the words of our *mouth* to be acceptable to the Lord, but also the *whisperings* of our heart. Our words can't be spoken and shared until they are inwardly formed and conceived. And so the earlier we can involve the Lord in that whole process of communication, the better it is for everyone.

It's a shame that preachers have hijacked this verse, because it isn't really about preachers. This is a verse about *all* of the things we offer up to God and God's people. And so this is a verse for *everyone*, because in *everything* we do and say and write and even post online, we are making an offering. And every offering we make has a consequence. Will our offering be holy, and bless and build-up? Or will it be unholy, and destroy and tear-down? Every day, hundreds if not thousands of times, the offerings of our hearts and mouths either bless or destroy.

"Let the words of my mouth and the whispering of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer." What if we prayed that little twenty-four word mini-prayer each time before we said or thought or wrote or posted something? Seems to me it would have an enormous, positive impact. I'm certainly not the first to suggest this. Have you ever heard of the Amidah? It's an ancient Jewish prayer that observant Jews offer three times each day, in the

morning, in the afternoon, and at night. It consists of nineteen different blessings of praise and petition that frame the entire day.¹ And can you guess the very last words of that ancient prayer? “Let the words of my mouth and the whispering of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.” Why? Because everything we say and do is an offering. And every offering we make has a consequence.

There’ve been many times throughout history when Christians have fallen into the trap of thinking we can neatly and easily pre-determine who is making an *acceptable* offering to the Lord and who is *not*. We form categories of “insiders” and “outsiders” based upon a wide variety of external factors like appearance, dress, gender, skin color, age, and national origin. And at many times, Christians have become quite certain that no one *outside* of the officially sanctioned institutional church could *possibly* have anything of value to offer to God and God’s people.

That attitude of spiritual elitism, however, clashes mightily with today’s lessons from Numbers and Mark’s Gospel. In both of those scripture passages, we’re presented with people who fail to show up at the right time or in the right place but still manage to speak a prophetic word from God. Those stories highlight people who may work on the margins, far from the center of the Church’s hierarchy and chain of command, and yet are able to work miracles simply because they have tethered their hearts to Jesus. These passages call all of us who work within the Church to deep humility. We can never fall into the trap of thinking that we have a monopoly on God or goodness. Jesus tends to color outside the lines, and, thanks be to God, Jesus cannot be boxed, controlled, or contained.

I was recently reminded how the words of our mouths and the whispering of our hearts here within the Christian Church sometimes cause more harm as good. A week ago, I was at a cell phone store because I needed a new phone case. As inevitably happens, my profession came up in the course of the conversation with the young man who was assisting me. Most of the time when people find out I’m a pastor, they share stories about a minister who made a big difference in their life, or a church that has blessed and nurtured them. But sometimes, my association with Christianity provokes some rather strong and negative feelings.

Such was the case with this young man. As he worked on my phone, he bluntly and bitterly shared how horrible his church experience had been. It wasn’t at Grace, but it serves as a cautionary tale for us. He said that when he was a boy, he and his brother were constantly criticized by a church member for a host of

petty things, like being too loud and not kneeling the correct way. The only thing the critic accomplished was driving these boys from the church and kindling in them an outright hatred for Christianity. What a stumbling block that critic was. My heart broke for the young man, because the offering of a Christian that he had experienced as a boy profoundly poisoned and embittered him. It will be a very long time before he gives any church a second chance. So does this mean churches are intrinsically toxic places?

No. Of course not! I believe in Jesus and I believe in his Church. We lose something very important if we think our relationship with God can be lived out in its fullness without a community of people around us. At Grace we invest our time and resources into an array of programs designed to foster both a deeper relationship with God, and a deeper relationship with one another. We *need* the Church, because *here* in the community of our Church, Christ comes to us in a real and tangible way through his transformational Word and his holy Sacraments. And *here* in the community of our Church we are regularly confronted with the brokenness of humanity and the challenge of getting along with others. But *here* in the community of our Church, we likewise are regularly comforted with the assurance of God's love, mercy, and forgiveness. Christianity is a team sport, not a solo undertaking. The institution of the Church is vital.

Nevertheless, as one of my favorite spiritual writers, Wilfrid Stinissen, has observed, "An institution can give people a certain material security, but it can't make them happy... Institutions are needed, but the love from God can only be communicated from person to person. And love is the only force that can transform an unhappy person."² Mister Rogers says it even more simply: "Love is at the root of everything - all learning, all relationships... Love or the lack of it."³

Friends, we are here today because to some extent, Jesus is transforming us. He's not doing it through complicated doctrine or terrifying threats. *Jesus transforms us with his love.* That's *his* business. And so that's *our* business too, both as individual Christians and as Christ's Church. Everything we say and do is an offering. And every offering we make has a consequence. Will our offerings draw people to Jesus? Or will they push people away from him? Our offerings – both kind and unkind – have the potential to speak more loudly and decisively about who and what we Christians are than even scripture itself. And so in everything, *choose love.* We want every daily offering we make to *reflect* Christ and *point others* to Christ. Frankly, that can be a struggle. We need help.

And so before you speak, react, or even post that sharply worded comment on Facebook, pray an ancient little prayer that just might make all the difference in your life and in the life of someone else. “Let the words of my mouth and the whispering of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.” Amen.

Citations

¹ www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/3834226/jewish/What-Is-the-Amidah-The-Silent-Prayer.htm#comment

² *This is the Day the Lord Has Made: 365 Daily Meditations* (Stinissen, 2000)

³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HV_kxc9PxrQ