

*“What Do You Offer In Pledge of Your Vows?”*

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Lent, Sunday, March 18, 2012

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Holy Scriptures: Numbers 21: 4-9    John 3: 14-21

John 3

4 From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. 5 The people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.”

6 Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. 7 The people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.”

So Moses prayed for the people. 8 And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” 9 So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

## Numbers 21

14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

17 “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. <sup>18</sup> Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

19 “And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup> For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. <sup>21</sup> But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

***What do you offer in pledge of your vows?***

Yesterday I was blessed to represent you and the church of  
Jesus Christ

at a lovely wedding in downtown Decatur.

Not only was the wedding service downtown,

it was out in the open, in the town square,

in full view of 100 invited, seated guests

plus several hundred folks where were  
Irish for the day,

wearing green and feeling the good good  
vibrations

of having imbibed for several hours

the fruit of the vine or the hops of  
barley.

Drummers were drumming, bagpipes were wailing,  
and there was much laughter in the air,  
but when the groomsmen came out  
and the bridesmaids processed  
the community grew quiet,  
and walked across the town square holding the arm of  
her father,  
everyone respectfully stood and watched.

It got better.

During the ceremony, while the city and our neighbors  
paused out of respect,

after the declaration of intent (the part where they say  
“I do”)

and the exchange of vows,

I explain the meaning of wedding rings.

The liturgy goes:

*The ring is a symbol.*

*In marriage, it is the symbol of the uniting of two lives*

*in a holy venture which will last throughout life.*

*The ring symbolizes love because,*

*like the circular nature of love, it does not end.*

*It is, therefore, fitting that you bind your sacred vows*

*by the giving and receiving of a ring, a beautiful and meaningful symbol.*

I asked the couple, “What do you offer in pledge of your vows?”

Of course, the answer is “rings.”

Except what the groom said was, “*My love.*”

I said, “*That is a great answer. You will do well.*”

***What do you offer in pledge of your vows?***

Wedding rings remind us of the vows we make,

the love we cherish,

and the commitment to honor and hold each other

that was made before God and one another.

The ring is a reminder, but it is not a marriage.

It is a symbol that points to the hard work and the deep joy we experience in relationship.

There are other symbols that serve to remind us of vows we have made

and the depth of meaning they hold for us.

The Chalice.

The Bread.

The church steeple.

The hand extended to help, to hold, to heal.

The hands clasped in prayer.

The Cross.

Our denominational symbol of the red Chalice with St. Andrew's Cross

was once explained to me this way:

imagine you are holding the Cup of our Lord at the Last Supper,

and the cross is right behind you

because you are standing in its shadow,

so the shadow falls across the Chalice,

and suddenly, each time you see

the symbol,

you remember how much  
God loves you.

***What do you offer in pledge of your vows?***

Do you recall the story in the Hebrew scriptures

that took place during the exodus of the Jews after  
they fled Egypt?

In their frustration and fear and desire to be in control,

some of the people of God cried out against the Lord,

and suddenly a fiery serpent appeared and  
killed them.

The people of God repented,

and then God did a fascinating thing.

The Lord took the same symbol of their punishment, the  
fiery serpent,

and used it as a symbol of their healing.

We see this symbol today on ambulances and hospitals and  
the AMA.

Only God has the power to re-cast an image

from punishment to healing, from death to salvation.

The symbol of God's loving and saving power was so important

that it had to be raised up, high above everyone's heads,

so that all could gaze upon it to see and believe

in God's power to heal our bodies and souls,

in God's desire to save us from death.

*"And so," said Jesus, "just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,*

*so must the Son of Man be lifted up,*

*that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*

Once again, God radically converts a symbol,

this time of a man who would be crucified.

The symbol of the cross,

to the Romans a symbol of punishment,

to the world a sign of folly, of foolishness, says



Paul,

but to those who see and believe the  
cross is lifted up high

to serve as a symbol of life and  
love.

Of course, unlike the fiery serpent in the wilderness then

or the one that emblazoned on the doors of  
ambulances today,

God did not send Jesus as a form of  
punishment.

Instead, God sent Jesus “to save the  
world.”

If you like, you could say that God sent Jesus as a pledge of  
God’s vow to love you.

***What do you offer in pledge of your vows?***

A friend once described her church

to someone who had never been there before: You will  
know you are in my church when you get there

if the people are friendly,

the worship services are meaningful and  
fulfilling,

and there is a *giant plus sign* on top of the building.

In the light and in the night we gather as one people

to stand in the shadow of that plus sign. We gather as one people to stand in the shadow of the cross. What is really dying on the cross in our souls?

Our egos; our selfishness; our self-centeredness; our me-myself-and-I-ness.

When we die with Christ, we rise with Christ. We rise as a new creation in Christ. What is being born anew and afresh in us?

A new creation in Christ. A selfless, other-centered new being that demonstrates God's love in all ways to all people.

Paul wrote to the people of Galatia:

*“But far be it from me to glory*

*except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me,*

*and I to the world.”*

What counts? Being “...a new creation.

*Peace and mercy be upon all who walk by this rule.”* (Galatians 6:14, 16) We know that through the grace of God

when we die with Christ we rise with Christ.

Paul teaches us in II Corinthians 5 that,

*“if anyone is in Christ, he (or she) is a new creation!The old has passed away, behold, the new has come.”*

In God's grace we find the true life in which we are a new creation.As a new creation of God we are commissioned to be kingdom builders.

And this is where the love of God is made incarnate,

where belief and practice meet in me, in you,

in the community of faith,

in the world that God loves so very much that

*“...he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish*

*but may have eternal life.*

*Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world*

*to condemn the world,*

*but in order that the world might be saved*

*through him.” (John 3: 16-17)*

***What do you offer in pledge of your vows?***

I met a gentleman from Naples, Florida.

He joined his local Rotary Club some 20 years ago.

He was given a lapel pin the day he joined.

The lapel pin is a miniature symbol of the Rotary International wheel.

He only wore it on occasion,

but over time and experience

as the depth and meaning of the service organization grew on him,

he wore his lapel pin more and more,

until he wore the same lapel pin every day for 16 years.

After the hurricane hit Haiti, his Naples Rotary club organized a food drive.

They brought together people from across the city to collect and pack meals,

and then shipped them to a Rotary club in Haiti.

A while later he got an opportunity to travel to Haiti to observe and help.

While there the Rotary district governor took him around to meet local club presidents.

The governor was giving one young club president a hard time,

demanding to know why he had not finished his paperwork or collected dues.

The young man said, *“Well, I have been busy. I have been feeding starving children.”*

He then shared his story,

how he had gone to the airport to meet a shipment of food

and had to argue and fight and persevere

to have the packages placed in his vehicle,

how the food was packaged and prepared for children in his community,

and how he and his neighbors had fed those who were most in need.

At that moment it dawned on the gentleman from Naples, Florida

that what was being described was the same food and meals

his community had prepared,

and that it had actually reached those he'd prayed it would serve.

He took off his lapel pin he'd worn for 16 years,  
one that symbolized a service organization, yes,  
but also symbolized service above self,  
and pinned it on the lapel of the young  
club president  
from a small town in Haiti.

***What do you offer in pledge of your vows?***

Symbols can serve to remind us of sacred vows.

But symbols work best with some skin on them.

We love like God first loved us

when we package food for the hungry and pay for the  
shipping costs,

when we fight and persevere for justice and  
mercy,

when we look across the great divide

and see before us a brother, a  
sister, a child of God,

one who lives and loves  
and breathes the same air.

God loves you.

Who needs you to love them like God loves you?

Oh yeah, I have to tell you how the wedding ended.

When I said, *“You may now kiss the bride!”*

all of Decatur cheered and roared and clapped.

Then I said, *“You are warmly invited by the family to a lovely reception*

*immediately following this worship service.”*

And the bride quickly added, *“Only those who have invitations!”*

Aren't you glad we're all invited to love?

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*