

*“What Do You Offer in Pledge of Your Vows?”*  
Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia  
Season of Lent, Sunday, March 11, 2018  
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Holy Scriptures: Numbers 21: 4-9    John 3: 14-21

Numbers 21

<sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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.”

<sup>6</sup> Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> 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.” <sup>9</sup> 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.

John 3

<sup>14</sup> 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.

<sup>16</sup> “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.

<sup>17</sup> “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.

<sup>19</sup> “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?***

Next Saturday is St. Patrick's Day.

Wikipedia's fact checker informs us

the day commemorates Saint Patrick and the arrival of Christianity in Ireland. Historically the Church's Lenten restriction on drinking alcohol was lifted for the day. Which, naturally, has encouraged and propagated the holiday's tradition of liberal alcohol consumption on March 17.

And that, my friends, explains why the most unlikely folks wear green hats, t-shirts and scarves that read, "Kiss me, I'm Irish."

The last time St. Patrick's Day landed on a Saturday,  
a wedding was held in downtown Decatur on the Square.

The Decatur Square was well-populated and well, lit.

Several hundred folks were present, and everyone was Irish for the day,  
wearing green and feeling the good, good vibrations,  
many having imbibed for several hours  
the fruit of the vine or the hops of barley.

On the Square were drummers, bagpipers and a vibrant, festive spirit.

There was also a wedding planned for that same afternoon.

You see, the wedding couple hailed from elsewhere.

The wedding couple chose our fair city for its convenience for family and friends;  
they picked the outdoor gazebo in the Square for its aesthetics and serenity.

They had no idea there would be crowds of very happy people filled with spirits,  
standing around the 100 chairs set up for wedding guests with a center aisle.

I'd an inside track on the couple's plans because I was the wedding officiant; like them, I had never been in downtown Decatur on St. Patrick's Day.

It was an education.

So, as the appointed hour drew near,

I stood beside the Groom on the top step of the Gazebo,  
he in a tuxedo, me in a clergy robe,  
stole flapping in the breeze, notes in hand,  
both of us taking in the scenery and energy of the  
moment.

We shared a great view.

Drummers were drumming, bagpipes were wailing,  
and there was much laughter in the air.

When the groomsmen and bridesmaids processed up the center aisle,  
the boisterous community grew quieter.

I spoke into a microphone; my voice boomed and echoed across the Square.

"My friends, please give the happy couple 15 minutes of peace.

Consider yourselves witnesses of their vows. We will be so grateful."

Then I raised my arms. "If you are able, please stand."

As the bride and her father walked up the aisle toward her husband-to-be,  
the Groom and I observed a wave of people in green arise.

The good, good vibrations got even better.  
During the ceremony the guests and onlookers watched and listened intently.  
After the declaration of intent (the part where they say "I do")  
and the exchange of vows,  
I went over the meaning of wedding rings.  
"The ring is a symbol," I said.  
"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."

"What do you offer in pledge of your vows?" I asked.  
Now, you know that the expected response is "rings."  
Except when asked "What do you offer in pledge of your vows?"  
the groom said, "My love."  
Oh!  
"That is a great answer," I said, "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.  
While the ring is a physical reminder, it's not a marriage.  
It is a symbol, a symbol that points  
to the work and play and deep joys and challenges  
experienced in relationship.

When I broke my wrist sliding into second base in a softball game,  
my hand and fingers swelled so much  
my wedding ring cut off the circulation of blood to my finger.  
I held onto a bag of ice as I steered and shifted gears one-handed to a jeweler's shop.  
When the jeweler cut the ring to save my finger,  
unexpected pangs of grief overcame me.  
Tears flowed down my cheeks.  
The jeweler gave me tissues, promising to reseal the ring.  
When the swelling subsided and the ring was ready,  
I was at the jeweler's when they opened.

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 Cup of Life.  
The Bread: The Body of Christ.  
A Church steeple. Baptistry and baptism font.  
The image of a hands clasped in prayer.  
The Cross, a vivid reminder of how much God loves you.  
This church was designed to symbolize the arms of Christ open to the city.  
These are symbols,  
    Visual, constant, daily reminders of vows made  
        to honor our covenants with God and one another.

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

Consider the Hebrew scriptures, in the Book of Numbers, Chapter 21.  
After the Hebrew people—our spiritual fore bearers—fled slavery in Egypt,  
    they spent many years in a time known as Exodus,  
        a long and difficult journey from bondage to freedom,  
            a spiritual journey from God’s deliverance and liberation  
                to God’s Promised Land.  
All was not smooth and easy during their journey and wandering  
    to find the Promised Land, the land of milk and honey and rest.  
“The people became impatient on the way.  
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.’”  
In their frustration and fear, impatience and desire to be in control,  
    some of the Hebrews cried out against the Lord.  
Suddenly a fiery serpent appeared and killed them.  
The people of God repented:  
“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.  
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.’  
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.”  
We see the symbol of a fiery serpent wrapped around a pole  
    on ambulances and hospitals and the AMA.  
When you think about it, God’s action was fascinating.  
God has the power to re-cast an image  
    of punishment to offer healing, from death to salvation.  
The Lord took the same symbol of their punishment, the fiery serpent,  
    and used it as a symbol of their healing.

The symbol of God's love and healing power was so important  
that once raised up, high above everyone's heads,  
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 Messiah crucified.

The symbol of the cross was to the Romans a symbol of punishment;  
to the world it's a sign of folly, of foolishness, says Paul;  
to those who see and believe and witness the love of God,  
the cross is lifted to serve as a symbol of salvation and  
redemption.

Of course, unlike the fiery serpent in the wilderness,  
God did not send Jesus as a form of punishment.

God sent Jesus to save the world.

God sent the Son, not to condemn the world,  
but that the world might be saved, redeemed, restored through Him.  
God sent Jesus as a living pledge of God's vow to love you.

In God's grace we find the true life in which we are a new creation.

God lifts our newly created selves for the world to see, to admire, to emulate.

Paul Tillich wrote, *"We want only to show you something we have seen  
and to tell you something we have heard...that here and there in the world  
and now and then in ourselves is a New Creation."* --The New Being

As a new creation of God, we are commissioned to be kingdom builders.

At this juncture we witness the love of God made incarnate.

Belief and practice meet in me, in you, here in the Body of Christ.

Belief and practice meet here, in us, in the community of faith,

in the world that God loves so 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 a hurricane decimated 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.

He prayed that God might deliver the food to the needy, not the greedy.

A while later he got an opportunity to travel to Haiti to observe and assist the relief effort.

The Haitian Rotary district governor escorted him to meet local club presidents.  
The district governor gave a young club president a hard time.  
He demanded to know why paperwork was not completed nor dues collected.  
The young man said, *"Well, I have been busy. I have been feeding starving children."*  
He then shared his story.

He went to the airport to meet a shipment of food  
He argued, fought and persevered to have the packages placed in his vehicle.  
He said his team of volunteers fed hungry children in the community.  
Slowly it dawned on the gentleman from Naples, Florida  
    that what was being described were the food packages his group had prepared.  
He realized that his prayers had been answered  
    by the grace of God and this young man's bold and brave leadership.  
He took off the lapel pin he'd worn for 16 years,  
    one that symbolized a service organization, yes,  
        yet also symbolized service above self.  
If you travel to the small town in Haiti,  
    you will find a young Rotary Club president  
        humbly bearing on his lapel the pin from a friend in Naples.

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

Symbols may serve to remind us of sacred vows.  
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 for you to love them just like God loves you?

Oh yeah, you have got to hear how the wedding on St. Patrick's Day ended.

After the rings and the declaration that the couple were now married,

I said to the Groom, "You may now kiss the bride!"

The 100 guests and the surrounding sea of people in green let out a cheer. They roared and clapped.

"You are warmly invited by the family to a lovely reception in the old courthouse," I said.

The bride immediately leaned over the microphone.

"Only those who have invitations!" she said.

The Good News is everyone is now invited  
to a meal given in remembrance of Him.

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