
Bring Your Best

Malachi 1:6–12

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

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In Mark Twain's imagination, two boys, Tom Sawyer and Ben Rogers had a discussion about how to become highwaymen. Their intent was to rob stagecoaches and they had a notion that perhaps they would also seek ransoms for the passengers. Tom had seen something about ransoms in a book, but the truth was neither of them knew what it was. It is then that Tom remarks, "Well, Ben Rogers, if I was as ignorant as you I wouldn't let on."¹

Jack Worthing is the protagonist in the play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Jack has an imaginary brother, named "Ernest", who is his excuse to dash out of town whenever he wishes. "Ernest" finds he is attracted to Gwendolen and they have this exchange.

"Gwendolen: Ernest, we may never be married. From the expression on mamma's face, I fear we never shall. Few parents nowadays pay any regard to what their children say to them. The old-fashioned respect for the young is fast dying out. Whatever influence I ever had over mamma, I lost at the age of three. But although she may prevent us from becoming man and wife, and I may marry someone else, and marry often, nothing that she can possibly do can alter my eternal devotion to you.

Jack: Dear Gwendolen!

Gwendolen: The story of your romantic origin, as related to me by manna, with unpleasing comments, has naturally stirred the deeper fibers of my nature. Your Christian name has an irresistible fascination. The simplicity of your character makes you exquisitely incomprehensible to me."²

Some insults are designed for a laugh, such quips about ignorance or simplicity of character. Good friends may routinely insult each other, trading light-hearted barbs as a form of amusement. Prodding and provoking the competition is standard practice in many games. With trust and frivolity, insults can be funny.

Except when they are not. Insults can carry and inflict great weight. According to the prophet Malachi, God is insulted and is not at all amused.

Malachi is the last in the Book of the Twelve, the Minor Prophets, which has been our focus this summer. We are nearing the end. Next week is the last sermon in this series. As we have listened to some of these prophets, such as Amos, Micah, and Habakkuk, we have heard calls for repentance and social justice, and we have seen the people cry out to God. The criticisms and challenges are harsh, yet underneath and throughout the prophetic words God's covenantal love is evident. The goal of the prophets is not to destroy the people with incessant critique, but instead to help the reform and return to the God who loves them.

Ultimately, Malachi goes in a similar direction, but first he needs to say why God is insulted. This book's style is argumentative. There is rapid-fire dialogue in which God accuses the people of misdeeds and the people accuse God of neglect.³ This is not friendly banter, but rather pointed barbs. The people targeted for this confrontation are the priests whose actions are particularly tangible. The priests are accused of bringing sick animals and polluted food as an offering to God, to God, the Lord God Almighty. This is explicitly prohibited in the Torah. For instance, in Deuteronomy there is the instruction "Every firstling male born of your herd and flock you shall consecrate to the Lord your God;...But if it has any defect—any serious defect, such as lameness or blindness—you shall not sacrifice it to the Lord your God." (Deuteronomy 15: 19a, 21) The gifts the priests were offering to God were far from their best and God is insulted.

Imagine taking a gift of food to a neighbor as a sign of welcome to the neighborhood or to a dear friend who is recuperating from illness. A gift of brownies might be a lovely gesture, unless they are burnt, offered on a dirty plate, with the ones that aren't burnt half-eaten. Maybe you still have crumbs on your shirt. That is not a gift; it

¹ Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

² Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*

³ *Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries : Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*.p. 190

is an insult.

The lame offerings of the priests would be disrespectful at any time, but they are particularly disrespectful in Malachi's time. While the dating of the book is not entirely certain, it is likely that it was written after the exile. Earlier prophets had warned of the exile, which would punish the people for their unfaithfulness. Now the Babylonian exile is over, and the people have returned to Israel. They returned with high hopes. Home. Rebuilt temple. Freedom to worship. A fresh start. All is good. Unfortunately, it wasn't long before the corruption and unfaithfulness that was present prior to the exile, was just as evident after the exile. The people had not changed. The people and the priests are offering God the runty animals, while perhaps keeping the best food for their own Sunday dinner.

In leveling an accusation against the people, God says "When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not wrong? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not wrong? Try presenting that to your governor; will he be pleased with you or show you favor?" (Malachi 1:8) That sounds to me as if God is insulted. God is saying, "You offer me, the ruler of all creation, some of the worst of what you have, but you would not dare to do that to the governor, your temporary earthly ruler." The prophet is incensed and God is insulted that the priests would offer anything but their best to God.

Do you think it a good thing this passage in Malachi is directed to the priests? I take it to heart. We, here, may not be doing animal sacrifices -- that would be a mess -- but we are responsible for worship leadership. I know how many times I have tripped over my own tongue or the times my brain and mouth seem to be temporarily disconnected. I hear the challenge of not offering my best to God.

It is a challenge I want to share with you, for, actually, none of us are off the hook. We have heard First Peter describe us as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people." (I Peter 2:9) All of us, together, are a royal priesthood. This text among others affirms the "priesthood of all believers", an affirmation which was highlighted during the Protestant Reformation. We have one high priest, Jesus Christ, and all of us can equally approach our Lord without need of additional intermediaries. Likewise, we are equally called to live and share the gospel of Jesus Christ. In our baptism and confirmation, we promise to be disciples of Jesus. Each of us. The sacrament of baptism sends us on a mission to love and serve God, that together we might be a light to the nations. We are all priests, all servants, of our one God.

So, Malachi challenges all of us to ask: Are we offering our best to God?

I can't answer that question for you, because there is no "one size fits all." I will suggest, however, that if you feel restless in God's presence, if your gut churns a bit, your heart skips a beat, your eyes notice new opportunities, or you hear the refrain of a particular verse, then it may be that God is at work in you. Maybe you need to pay attention. Perhaps a conversation with another Christian will bring insight. It could be you need to pray and listen. God calls each of us, in a variety of ways.

Sometimes stories help us to discern. The gospel of Mark tells the story of Jesus teaching in the temple. Jesus saw the scribes and pharisees walking around in fine clothing and sitting in places of honor. While they looked good on the outside and said long, no doubt elegant, prayers, Jesus did not have much use for them. He said they were devouring widow's houses. Later, when Jesus was sitting around watching people put money into the treasury -- that in and of itself is a little intimidating, Jesus just watching what people offered -- he saw some rich folks put large sums of money into the treasury. Then, he saw a poor widow put in two copper coins. Jesus did not praise the big givers, but instead honored the woman who put in two small coins, because she gave all that she had. It was her best. (Mark 12:38-44)

This passage from the gospel of Mark lifts up a sacrificial gift, and it also reminds us that God looks upon the heart, not the outward appearance. (I Sam 16:7) Others watching that scene in the temple may have focused on the large gifts and not the actions of a poor widow. We can't judge the gifts or service of others, because we may not know the full story.

A friend of mine, Rose, is a life-long runner. Here is one of her favorite running stories. Rose was out for her usual long run on a Saturday. On this particular Saturday, she was running a mid-day, in the summer, in Arkansas. On a hot summer day she was running as hard as she could and earning a substantive workout. In church the next day, a young boy called out to her saying, "Hi Ms. Rose. I saw you out taking a walk yesterday." She thought to herself, "Walk? That was no walk, I was running!" The boy couldn't see the effort Rose was exerting.

Emily was a member of a church I served some time ago. She was dedicated to the congregation's major mission of housing a high-quality, low-cost daycare center. She served on the board of the daycare center and advocated for it whenever she could. One day as we were talking, Emily said that she felt that the best way for her to aid the daycare center was to make more money. She is a talented professional in the finance industry who is capable of earning additional income. Emily saw that what the center needed was funds to continue to offer highly subsidized child care. If you just looked at her life from the outside, you might wonder why she wanted to make more money. The truth was, she felt called to make more money so she could give it away.

Offering our best to God can take many forms. There is not just one "right" way to make an offering to God. Even in our own lives, in different seasons, our offerings can take different forms. No matter what we offer, we can strive to offer our best.

Jesus said the widow who offered two small coins gave everything she had. Gave everything. Perhaps that is the real key. Not holding back what we think is too much to sacrifice. Scripture teaches us that we are to love God with our heart, soul, mind and strength. In other words, to love God with everything we have. It is not a sacrifice to love with everything we have, to offer everything we have, when we realize that all that we have come from God and already belongs to God. We belong to God. We don't need to and can't hold anything back because what we have and who we are is already God's and always will be. We belong to God. We are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people."

The best we can offer to God is ourselves - trusting, unafraid, and grateful - for God to use as God wills. In those moments when we can do this, we discover the welcome of God's covenantal love.

Thanks be to God. Amen.