

Being loved

When I was about 12 my parents had me join the Scouts.

I really tried my best to be a good Scout, but I am not a joiner by nature, and though I learned a great deal from my 6 months, it never was a good fit for me.

Each week we all began by paying our "subs". The Scout Master would collect a sum of money from each of us, a good chunk of my pocket-money, and then the evening would continue. I think I missed a session because I had the 'flu. Then one because of something else, and then I just never went back. About 6 weeks of not going produced a phone call from the Scout Master. I told him I had left, and did not intend to return. "You owe us 6 weeks of subs." He said. This was a key moment for me. It was the first time I had thought about money and payment. I could accept that I should pay for the evening of being a Scout each week. I honestly didn't want to, but I could see the fairness of it. But why should I pay for something I had not received?

I thought I was "buying" something each week. The Scout Master thought I was paying towards the life of an organization to which I belonged.

Buying and Belonging.....

I knew I had never belonged to the Scouts. I neither owned them, nor allowed them to own me. He never got his missing subs.

When I left school I went to Durham University to discover the truth of all that exists in the study of pure theoretical physics. I loved this stuff! But to my immense shock, I discovered the truth in meeting Jesus in the Gospel stories. The truth is , simply, love. I understood that I am loved.

My life is a dance on the palm of God's hand. The truth of my existence is that I am loved by God. No conditions or clauses, just unutterably loved.

Jesus asked me, "David, will you give yourself to me?"

When you pay a fee it is a transaction of the hand, a passing over of cash. "You give me this, I give you that."

When you pay because you belong it is a recognition of a commitment, a contract set for a time. It lasts as long as you need or want it to. A transaction of the hand and the head.

When you give yourself to someone in love the divide between seller and buyer evaporates . Love is not a trade, a calculation or a contract. It is the unconditional opening of the heart to the other's open heart.

Last week we celebrated Mother Julian of Norwich.

One of the loveliest stories from Julian's series of visions involves a time when she was asked to hold something little, no bigger than a hazelnut. When she asks God what this is, she is told "It is everything that is made." She marvels that this thing could even continue to exist, so small and delicate it appears. She then comes to understand that this little thing exists — and continues to do so — because God loves it. "In this little thing, I saw three properties. The first is that God made it. The second is that God loves it. The third is that God keeps it."

And in this he showed me something small, no bigger than a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed to me, and it was as round as a ball. I looked at it with the eye of my understanding and thought: What can this be? I was amazed that it could last, for I thought that because of its littleness it would suddenly have fallen into nothing. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and always will, because God loves it; and thus everything has being through the love of God.

So I exist because God loves me, and this church exists because God loves it, and the birds, the clouds, the rolling seas, the galaxy, the sun and the planets in their courses all exist because God loves them. And we are here, all of us, good and bad alike, because God loves us.

So I thought about my offering in Church.

What I had been doing, since going to church was “my thing” and not a family activity, was to empty the remains of my week’s money into the collection, retaining just enough for a beer on Sunday evening. Frankly, I did this with poor grace and some resentment. It was not done in generosity.

So I thought again.

If all that exists is God’s then everything I have is God’s. So I need to take what I need from what I have been given, and return the rest to God. So, being young, I took enough for rent, for food and heat and books, and enough for a reasonable beer intake (and cigarettes I must confess). Then I looked at what was left of my weekly budgeted amount. That was the money I would set aside on Monday and put onto the plate in Church that weekend.

It is not to do with paying God. Nor is it about funding the church’s budget. This was a thing between me and God. It was part of my relationship with him. And it still is.

Now I live on a more complicated budget than I did at 20. Then I planned on getting through the week. Now we are planning on having enough saved up to retire and keep living for a while. So we still take the first part of our income. We take a tenth and know that it is not ours, but God’s, as all things are. We hold this tenth in a different place and we give it back to God through the church and through other places where Jesus seems to be at work and we can help.

When we talk about money in Church people generally get tense.

This sermon is about money, but without tension. When you look at money and church , look at God and yourself

It is not about buying something. The service each week is not a commodity for sale. It is a gift of worship to God and of love to each other. There are no performances here, just a sharing of our best efforts for Christ’s sake. So each Sunday is free!

It is not about paying for membership like the fees for a club. The church is not a club for its members’ enjoyment. It is the Body of Christ here for the sake of those who are lost and lonely and hurt.

The Church is the collection of people who realize that they are like hazel nuts (or another nut of your choice!) sitting in the palm of God’s hand, and looked upon with love. It is a community of people who all want to get together to say regular “THANKS” to God, and to give their lives, their selves, to God in return. Money is a big part of life, so it is a big part of love too, just like time, or prayer, or direction of the heart.

Grace Church is still an experiment. Many of the people here, I know, are still in the “Let’s see how this goes” bracket of membership. Others are in the “Well, I don’t know, maybe we will leave” and others are in the “Gee, God, this seems pretty risky but I’ll go where you lead me”. There are other brackets, maybe one for each of you.

I invite you to take time this week to work out where you are with Grace, with God and with what God has put into your hands and life. Don’t pay. Don’t bargain. But return to God, by whatever route, the first part of the abundance he gives you in his endless love.