**Baptismal Liturgy**

In our baptisms we are sealed by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit guides us and equips us as disciples of Jesus Christ. The Spirit comforts us and encourages us. The Spirit also holds us accountable to the Word. The Spirit is our teacher and counselor. In his Letter to the Philippians, the Apostle Paul said that he could do all things through the God in Jesus Christ who strengthened him. Paul also said we should rejoice always and give thanks. Let us rejoice as we remember the promise of baptism. Let us give thanks for the power of the Holy Spirit moving in our midst. May you be blessed in your worship this morning.

**Malachi 3: 8-10**

8 Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, “How are we robbing you?” In your tithes and offerings! 9 You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me--the whole nation of you! 10 Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.

Thanks, musicians. You help us lift up the eternal gates and receive the King of glory. How blessed we are by those who offer their gifts of music each week – and by the rest of you who help them, encourage them, and appreciate them. Some of our musicians come to rehearsal even though they are under pressure at work because they know that glorifying God with their gifts is important, too. People come to practice bells or sing and play with the Praise Team when they face difficult personal trials. One person told me that singing was the only time she forgot her pain. When we offer our gifts to God, the Prophet Malachi said God opens the windows of heaven for us.

Dolly Fugit plays bells, but she is also one of many volunteers who work behind the scenes to make music and worship happen. Dolly copies and organizes the music each week for the Praise Team and the choir. Dolly was here working the day before her knee surgery, and she returned to help again as soon as she could. Dolly is one of many people in this congregation who make ministry and mission possible by offering their time, talents, and treasures - quietly and faithfully. Our gifts make a difference.

We are blessed to glorify God through worship this morning. We are blessed to glorify God through all the mission projects and ministries of the church. When we lift up our voices and our gifts, the psalmist said the King of glory comes. When we bring our tithes to the Lord, the Prophet Malachi said God pours overflowing blessing on us.

The Apostle Paul wrote about the blessings of God. In his Letter to the Philippians, Paul said we should rejoice always and not worry. Listen for God’s Word from Philippians 4: 1-9, 12-13. Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to
God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. 8 Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. 9 Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. 10 I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. 11 I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

May God bless us with understanding of this Holy Word, this Holy Wisdom. Please pray with me. Loving and merciful God, we give thanks for the many blessings of our lives, including the blessing of sharing in the ministry of Jesus Christ in this time and place. You have given us so many gifts. You ask us to use those gifts to bring the Good News to others. You ask us to be the voice, hands, and feet of Christ in the world. You ask for a tithe, a tenth of our material blessings, yet we often hold back. We are afraid. We are afraid of not having enough. Sometimes we get a glimpse of the kingdom, but often the influence of the world is too great. Open our hearts and minds as surely as you open eternal gates in Jesus Christ. By the power of the Holy Spirit, help us live into the faith we profess. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, for you are our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

I saw “Argo” this week. What a great movie. When the CIA agent proposed posing as a Canadian film production crew, everyone thought he was crazy. How could he get six American hostages out of Iran by saying they were producing a non-existent science-fiction film? The six Americans thought he was crazy, too.

The movie is based on a real incident in Iran over thirty years ago. It is chillingly similar to the reality faced by those serving this country in the Middle East today. As I watched the movie, I gave thanks to God for those who offer their gifts to bring justice and peace. I rejoiced in the blessings of peace we often take for granted.

The CIA agent received an award, but he could not tell anyone about it for years. Sometimes only God knows what we do that is good and right and just. Sometimes we are called to face death, but in Christ we know that death is not the end. Christians rejoice and give thanks under any circumstances. We need not worry. We experience peace even in challenging circumstances because the Lord is near. We find strength we never knew we had by the power of the Spirit.

This was the message Paul sent the Christians at Philippi. Paul was in prison. He would never get out. There would be no earthquake this time. The Christians in Philippi were being persecuted for their faith. The persecution would continue. The persecution would get worse.

Paul’s letter is not some “pie in the sky” “feel good” message. This is the Word of God. It is the Good News of Jesus Christ. Paul experienced God’s presence, peace, and strength when his life was the pits. In his later years Paul gave all he could in service of Christ. God opened the windows of heaven to him, just like Malachi said God would do. The peace Paul experienced was in the midst of suffering. Paul was serious about rejoicing always.
This passage reminds me of the witness of a wonderful cousin by marriage. As we walked into a high school stadium to watch her daughters play in the band she told me her life was the best it had ever been, if only she were not dying. She rejoiced that night because of the love that surrounded her. My last memory was her smile as she lifted up her hands to pray shortly before she died.

Our passage from Philippians was a favorite of Tom Barber, one of the saints of this congregation who now rests with the Lord. I read about rejoicing always as his family and I prayed around his bedside at the hospital. Tom could not talk, but he nodded his head and his eyes twinkled.

People in this congregation know how to rejoice always and keep their minds on the Good News of Jesus Christ. Leonard Kropp came directly from his cardiologist’s office to work on a house for Community Restore. Every year people rejoice while they work to help strangers in 100 degree heat. I hear rejoicing when people mow the church yard, move rocks, pull weeds, assemble a playground, or clean up the kitchen – they even wear bling when they clean up the kitchen. There was a lot of rejoicing in the pumpkin patch yesterday. People offer their gifts when they face surgery, cancer, job loss, and trouble at home, school or work. When we offer our gifts and rejoice, God opens the windows of heaven. God’s peace is with us.

God opened the windows of heaven for Mother Teresa (Total Surrender). We now know that she suffered from depression, which makes her ministry even more amazing. Anyone would be depressed serving poor children on the streets of Calcutta, but Mother Teresa told the Sisters of Charity to always serve with joy. If they could not hold a dying baby with joy, Mother Teresa told them to stop their ministry and pray until their faith was strengthened. Rejoicing in the Lord always is an act of faith. It is a discipline.

The ministry and mission opportunities offered through this church are not depressing or life threatening, but they are life giving. Mother Teresa said the brokenness and hurt she observed among shut-ins in New York City was no less painful than what she saw in India (Total Surrender, 137). The shut-ins felt unwanted and unloved. They experienced a terrible pain of loneliness and fear.

We see that kind of pain in Georgetown. Rev. Mary Ferris sees that pain in Romania. Martha Ulbricht sees that pain in the eyes of residents where her son Hank lives. Martha said that those of you who offer your gifts of music and worship at the home bring joy. Some of the residents have no one to take them out. You come in with the Good News. You come rejoicing.

We rejoice and give thanks by letting our gentleness be known to others. We rejoice by simple acts of kindness. The birthday card you send may be the only one a person receives. The hospitality you offer through a smile, a listening ear, a cup of coffee, or refreshments during fellowship are gifts to God.

When you fill bags of food for hungry children, deliver meals on wheels, or drive people for Interfaith Caregivers, you offer more than your time, talents, and gas money. You offer the love and joy of Jesus Christ through your gifts, and God opens the windows of heaven for you. The same is true for those who make prayer shawls, cook meals for children, work in the pumpkin patch, or volunteer with the NEST for homeless youth.
Malachi spoke of bringing our tithes to God. In ancient days, tithing usually referred to food. The care of crops and animals required time and talents. The harvest was the treasure. In later times, tithing referred to wealth and income, as it usually does today.

Malachi was blunt. He said people were robbing God. Those are strong words. I am uncomfortable when I hear them. I do not like to think of myself as a robber. Malachi’s words are the Word of God for me. Obeying them is a challenging act of faith and discipline for me.

I tithe the salary you give me. Most of my tithe goes to this church. So far this year I have pledged $4800 to the General Operating Budget. I have given $1000 to reduce our debt. I give to the seminary and few other organizations, but I give most of my tithes to God through this church because that is how I feel called. I know the church needs the money. I know this congregation is careful about how it spends money, but that is not why I give my tithes. I give according to the call I discern through reading the Word, through prayer, and through discussion with other believers.

As some of you know, I do not have the gift of giving money. I am more comfortable giving my time and talents. Giving money is difficult for me. I will carry debts for John’s college expenses until I die because my life insurance will make the final payments. Like many people today, I have no clue what my care costs will be as I get older, nor do I know what the stock market will do.

Tithing is a way that I live into my trust that God will provide. It is a way that I honor God’s Word because I believe the scriptures say I should tithe. During my training as a new church development pastor, I heard repeatedly that I cannot expect others to do what I am not doing. If I do not invest the ministry and mission of the church I serve, how can I expect others to do so?

I intend to spend time listening for God’s call regarding my pledge next week, so that I can give my pledge before our commitment Sunday on November 4th. I have already been thinking about it. What if the Session decides to have a capital campaign next year? If I pledge my full tithe to the operating fund, how will I have enough funds to give to the other campaign? I think I already know the answer. The church is running low on funds this year. Some people do not have funds to give. I believe God wants my full tithe for the operating budget. I will probably hear that I should trust God to provide – that I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

I am not the only one who has trouble tithing. Surveys suggest that most Presbyterians give around 3% of their annual income to the church. That is greater than the national average of Christian giving to charity, which is approximately 2% (Presbyterian Outlook, October 1, 2012, 19). Twenty percent of Americans who say they are Christians give nothing at all to churches or to charities. A recent survey by sociologists at Notre Dame concluded that many American Christians think they give more than their financial records indicate.

One pastor gave a sermon on the top five reasons he didn’t tithe yet (Carter, Speaking of Stewardship, 59-64). “I don’t tithe yet, he said, because the church has not talked about tithing very much.” I do not tithe yet because I think giving ought to be useful. I want to control how the church spends the money I give. I do not tithe yet because I keep forgetting that my entire life is a gift from God.
I do not tithe yet, he said, because giving is not always a first priority or a regular discipline. Other people send me bills. They charge late fees. God does not do that.

“I don’t tithe yet,” the pastor said, “because I do not trust God enough -or to put it another way, because I am afraid.” The Notre Dame sociologists found insecurity as a primary reason people do not give, even among those who were wealthy.

Maybe our fear is the reason God asks us to tithe. God wants us to learn that God will provide what we need. We learn by following what we hear in God’s Word. We learn through prayer and through the witness of the saints. We learn by acting on faith. The Apostle Paul told the Philippians that he learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me, Paul told the Philippians.

We can do all things through God who strengthens us. What is important is our faithfulness to what we believe God is calling us to give and do for Christ. Offering our time, talents and treasures to God is an act of faith, discernment, and discipline.

Our gifts are precious to God because we are precious to God. God only knows the blessings that will result from our giving. God wants to open the windows of heaven for us. God wants to pour blessings over us. God wants us to rejoice always. God is waiting. May God bless your stewardship.