

Hillcrest Congregational Church, UCC  
Rev. Dr. Loletta M. Barrett  
11-29-09  
Consecrating  
Isaiah 64:1-9, Luke 1:26-28

Today is Consecration Stewardship Sunday. Today we consider what God has given in to our care- what we are to be stewards of, and we are asked to consecrate our financial pledges toward those responsibilities for the next year. Consecrating- means dedicating, setting aside for a special, even a sacred purpose.

The angel told Mary that God had set her aside from all other people as special. After the angel told her God's plan, Mary responded by saying yes to God's invitation- and dedicated her life to God's purpose. She told the angel, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord. She was then consecrated to serve God in a special way.

I would like to highlight the two main characters in this story. First, our God is a relational God. It is in relationship that we are invited to join with God and God's purposes and to become Co-creators with God. God did not and does not work alone. God worked through Mary, a human woman to bring Jesus, the Light in to the world. Second, before Mary was consecrated to serve God, she was told the purpose of her service. Then, she welcomed the news of being given an opportunity to serve God with her whole self. Before we consecrate anything, I think God wants us to know the purpose, and so we can joyfully, bring our whole self.

Now this story raises a question: in some translations Mary is called a "virgin," and the word used meant simply young unmarried girl. Why would a young, unmarried girl (probably only 12 years old), be happy about this moment in her life? Because God called her. Mary joyfully accepted the invitation from God to be the mother of Jesus. Accepting a call into

relationship with God was obviously a powerful and life changing thing for Mary. It is something that she and others accept because of the joy of relationship.

This is what God wants for us, to join with God because we cannot imagine our life without the joy of God. God invites us into relationship. God does not demand we join God in co-creating, nor require that we give of ourselves or our resources begrudgingly or without thought. God only wants what we have willingly and joyfully chosen to give and consecrate.

This sanctuary we are in was consecrated, the entire church grounds were consecrated. We look at the things here at church differently than we do at things at home or at work. They have been set aside for God or at least for the church. But when we say that, I think we may have set up an artificial dichotomy.

A seminary colleague from Nigeria told me that one concept that was difficult for him to adjust to here was our value of individual ownership. He described it this way. In Nigeria, everything belongs to and is a blessing from God, and that means the community of God. If Isaiah had a car, it would not be because he was “better, richer or more blessed” than others. It would be because God chose to park the car in the driveway in front of the house where he lives.

If someone from the church needed to go into the town, they would simply come and get the car. Then they would go around the village telling people that they were going to town. Others might go with them, or ask them to bring something back for them. If they had money for gas, they would put gas in the car. If not, they would not. They do not borrow Isaiah’s car, they use the car that God parked where Isaiah and his family live. The blessings of God belong to everyone in the community regardless of which driveway they are parked in.

But there still seems to be a dichotomy. There is God, and there is us. There is God and there are things. But if we believe that God is the Creator of all things, if we believe that nothing exists outside of God, if we believe that God is in all things, then we need to adjust our thinking.

Let me give another illustration. These two pieces of paper are two of my paychecks. If I think of them as my paychecks, then I have to decide how I will use them. I can divide one up like this (tearing paper): some for mortgage, some for student loan, some for utilities, some for food, some for savings, some for charities, and some for church. But some might say that if I tithe I would first take 10% and give it to God (tear and put on altar). Then I can use the remaining 90% however I would like.

But again, this is a false dichotomy. It implies that the 10% I gave to God is different than the 90% I kept. The 10% is sacred and the 90% is not. Theoretically, I could use the 90% to do anything-gamble, buy drugs, and it would be okay as long as I have already given God 10%. Or, if I used the 90% to care for others, to give to charities, to buy my family food, it would be special, but not sacred. But if all things exist within God, then the 90% is no different from the 10%, is it?

One last example from our own backyard, the art here at the church. The arts are feted by many people- art societies, museums, collectors, why a church? Because we have chosen to see how God works through artists, how concepts are expressed by artists in ways that open our minds to new ideas, to beauty, to questions... The art is part of, not separated from the artist, the artist is part of, not separated from the Creator. We acknowledge that we see the Great Artist through everything around us, then even through art that is "secular," we see the Sacred. Working together on the Festival of the Arts is also when many of you say you most feel that you are a community, a koinonia, a church, God's people.

But this then is the crux of the thing, if we have to decide what is sacred and what is secular, if we are supposed to give God back some percentage of what we have, or decide what is to be consecrated and set aside and what can be used for “secular” purposes, we have a lot of decisions to make. Not only our finances or our possessions, but every breath we take, every action, every thought. And since I am in church, on sacred ground, I should act and treat people a certain way. Since this is God’s time so I should not think certain thoughts. But when I am in other places, when it is not church time, I can act or think and treat people differently?

This is all way too complicated for me. If we and everything we know exists within God, if we are part of God and God is within us and everything we know, then I think we can make it easy on ourselves. We have only one decision to make. We can either work with God or not.

Just like Mary we have been set aside as special. We can respond by asking and hearing what God’s plan is for us as individuals and as a church. We can choose to say, “Here we are, the servants of the Lord,” and then be consecrated to serve God in a special way. We can consecrate it all, dedicate ourselves, everything we have and are, all that is here to being part of God’s plan. We can acknowledge that everything is, and can be, sacred and get on with our lives, in each moment, giving joyfully. God has already chosen us and set us aside for a special purpose. Now God is inviting us. Let us joyfully bring our whole selves and say yes!