



From Your Pastor
Fall 2011

SYMBOLS & PROMISES

By Rev. Douglas S. Stivison

Churches love symbols. We adorn our buildings with crosses, work symbols into our stained glass windows, carve symbols into our furniture, and embroider them onto our altar cloths. Symbols remind us of the deeply spiritual values represented by a tangible morsel of bread or a ring of gold. Our order of worship uses beautiful symbolism in placing the Sunday offering immediately after the reading and preaching of the Word of God. This helps us remember that our offering is an act of personal, active response to God's word and how we have allowed God's word to touch us. What we give and the act of giving are tangible symbols of the place we give to God in our lives.

We are the hands of God at work in the world. It is through our caring for others that they experience God's care, and through the healing hands of ordinary people that we feel God's healing. When we give to the church, we are giving to God. Not in the sense of making sacrifices to appease an angry god, but in the sense that our gifts – and that is what they are — not fees, not bills, not invoices, not demands – but our *gifts* are truly that: something given freely to God, to be used in God's church here and now. These true gifts arise from some of the most beautiful aspects of our nature: love, gratitude, joy, and compassion.

Our giving to the church is our reaction to the blessings we receive through *experiencing the presence of God* during worship services that warm

our hearts and renew our spirit. It is our reaction to *sensing God's love* through the contact with the pastors and “the ministry of all believers” during times of celebration, loss, difficulties, and trouble.

This brings us back to the importance of symbols in church life. Unlike the bills and appeals we receive from external organizations, our giving to the church *ultimately comes from within our own heart* in response to our deeply personal experience of God in our lives. We use a symbol to remind us of this qualitative difference in our giving to the church. For Christians, the pledge card is a symbol that is neither a bill nor an appeal, but is a promise that we make freely not to our church, not to our treasurer, not to our pastor — *but to our God*. The pledge card is a tangible symbol of a promise made freely and gratefully just like a wedding ring is a symbol of promises made freely and lovingly.

The entire leadership of our congregation: our pastors, officers, and all ministry and committee heads have said freely and enthusiastically that they will be pledging this year. By their example, they hope to help us all see the symbolic importance of this promise to God to care for God's church and to support God's mission among us. As pastor, I invite you to join with me and our congregation's leaders in this symbolic reaction to receiving God's love.