
Your Perfect Offering

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by the Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler,
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip**

There's a story about Duke Ellington that has been quoted so often that I don't really know where it was written first.

But I will start with a few remarks from *The San Francisco Chronicle*, September 17, 1965. The newspaper was reviewing the very first "Sacred Concert" performance of Duke Ellington, which had been heard at Grace Cathedral the previous night. That review, titled "Duke Swings at Grace Cathedral," reported that the performance "*appeared to leave many of the audiences discomfited, nervous, or edgy, not completely willing to accept the idea that the wild sound of a sax should pierce the austere heights of the Episcopal cathedral's nave. "It's all very strange,' a high churchman commented during intermission, "but oh, lordy, it's fascinating!' The point of the performance, according to Grace Cathedral's dean, the very Reverend C. Julian Bartlett, was that any offering to God is sacred, whatever its form.*"

Duke Ellington himself went on to say, "*It has been said once that a man, who could not play the organ or any of the instruments of the symphony, accompanied his worship by juggling. He was not the world's best juggler, but it was the one he thing he did best, and so it was accepted by God. For my part, I regard this concert as the most important thing I have ever done.*"

I think about "offering" a lot. As most of you know, during almost every Sunday service, I make a few special remarks at the Offertory. That's the part of the service which most of us recognize as the time the collection plate comes around the pews. However, in addition to money, the Church receives all sorts of offerings at that time. Musicians among us offer their music. Maybe a few of us offer some silent prayers. But I invite people to offer to God whatever it is "whatever it is!" that we have brought to church that day. Some of us have brought great joy to church, and others of us have brought only some sadness or pain that we woke up with that day.

An incredible miracle occurs every Sunday at the Offertory. God accepts whatever it is that we have offered, and God blesses it. God blesses all our various offerings at the same time that God blesses the offered bread and wine of Eucharist. Then, when we physically receive the Body and Blood of Christ at communion, we also spiritually receive back our own original offerings. But those original offerings are not the same; they have been consecrated and renewed. When we receive them back, they become the tools for ministry that enable us to be the Body of Christ in the world.

The dean of Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, in 1965, was able to see that any honest offering to God is sacred, whatever its form. Duke Ellington offered his jazz that day, and God blessed it. The world is now a better place because Duke Ellington had his offering accepted and blessed.

Of course, some of us are reluctant to offer gifts that seem meager, or blemished, or not quite right. Most of us do not have the talent of Duke Ellington! That is certainly the case with me!

Well, when I consider the modesty of our gifts, I think of another musician, my old hero, Leonard Cohen. In one of his

most famous lines, he reminded us of this: "Ring the bells that still can ring/ Forget your perfect offering. / There is a crack in everything. / That's how the light gets in."

"Forget your perfect offering," Cohen wrote. He is right. In fact, the "perfect" offering is not the one that ranks above all others, something that seems pure and unblemished and uncracked. The offering that God loves is our honest offering, the offering of who we are and whatever we have, cracked and blemished as it may be. All God wants us to do is offer it, in whatever cracked shape it may be in. Don't worry about perfection; that's up to God. It is only when God blesses our offerings that they become perfected. But, first, they must be offered!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip