

## THE SHEARING OF THE SHEEP

I made you a solemn promise last year, though some of you may have forgotten. I will make the promise again this year: **We will not become the church we need to be – we will not become the church we want to be – if we do not become a church of tithers.** The simple truth is that Christianity is a WAY of Life and the Christian church is a family of believers – a community of people who choose to walk the WAY together. If we do not pool a significant amount of our resources to do and be that which we have claimed as our high and holy purpose, then our talk is without much substance, and our experience will not be worth very much either. Do not hear that as some kind of moral judgment. It is a simple statement of reality. Nothing in the Constitution or in the laws of our land says we have to be here. Nothing is trying to *make* us be a Christian church. Jesus never coerces; He invites. He never lays anything heavy upon us *until after* we start claiming that we want to come with Him. Even then, He merely tells us the truth: “This is the Path – this is the WAY – and if you are not willing to change just about everything you know or care about for something even better, don’t even bother to take one step in my direction, because it will not work. You are used to nature – to priorities of survival, to having natural desires and goals and affections. My WAY is not *natural* – it is *spiritual*. My Kingdom is not of this world. If you come with me – if you follow my WAY – it will transform you entirely: change the way you see everything, and change the motives and reasons by which you live. And along the WAY, you will often experience a disorientation, a kind of interior vertigo, as you are learning to switch from the natural to the spiritual dimension.”

“Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.”  
“*Friend, who told you I would waste my life and time caring about disputes like that? Beware of greed. It will consume your life and leave you with nothing of lasting value.*” “Hey, wait a minute! This son of my own mother is trying to cheat me out of my inheritance, and you don’t even care? What kind of rabbi are you? You don’t care about justice, fair play, or even my personal welfare? What kind of double-talk are you trying to hand us?”

You see? It is not natural – it is not “of nature.” We cannot hear Jesus from the natural plane without corrupting, minimizing, and changing everything He tries to teach us. If we get comfortable with

Jesus' teachings, we are flunking the Kingdom of Heaven. We have re-worked the teachings down to a level that makes sense to our natural instincts, but they no longer nurture our souls. Jesus is always the Christ – the Transformer. No amount of years or centuries can ever change that. We may be drawn to Him; we may come to love Him more than life itself. But we will never be *comfortable* with the One who changes us from our natural being to our spiritual being.

The problem, as always, is that we were created both natural and spiritual. Though we are afraid to live as spiritual beings, we are never content – never at peace – while we live as natural beings. So even as we are offended by Jesus and even though we often mock the spiritual life, yet we cannot find true joy, meaning, or even love on the level we most hunger for it – until we cut loose from our “natural” ways and start to follow Him.

So it can never be a moral judgment if we do not tithe – if we do not become a genuine faith family. No *sane* person would give a dime to the Christian church; it ain't natural. The only thing dumber is to be *here* instead of out playing golf. (I can hear a few “natural minds” saying “Amen.”) Only, a dime is not going to do it – not unless it is one dime off the top of every spendable dollar we ever get.

**I promise you, we will never be the church we want to be unless we become a church of tithers.** There are spiritual dimensions to the discipline of tithing – dimensions of surrender, devotion, trust, worship, and allegiance. But I am not talking about that yet. Be objective for a moment. Stand back and look at our churches. All churches are a collection of people who come together claiming devotion to Jesus and a desire to live the Christian Life. They have a mandate to love each other. But look at them. They squabble and fight and spend endless hours haggling over minor details. Most UCC churches have woefully inadequate facilities; are way understaffed; cannot afford interesting or exciting programs or facilities for their youth; think nothing of treating employees like flunkies and paying them like peasants. As the Trustees say in many churches (not this one, thank Heaven): “We believe in charity – for our employees as well as for the poor.” A very bad misuse of the concept of *caritas* – but then, what can you expect from an orphanage?

What kind of a message does it send when our churches invite people to come be part of them but they worship in oversized garages stuck in the middle of ugly lots? Oh, we have a few churches from

former times, like this one. But what churches have we built in the last thirty years that are not an offense to every aesthetic sense known to man? The message we send is that we have no money. And the life of most churches in the UCC is a constant haggling over dollars – trying endlessly to decide whether to spend our money in this way or in that, when, if we cared at all, we would be doing *both* and ten times more besides. The message we send and live with is that we have no money. And since everybody knows we do have money, the message we send is that we don't really care; we don't think the church is important; we don't believe that the church – the life of the faith community – is really necessary to what Jesus is about. The average member in the United Church of Christ gives not ten percent but two percent of their spendable income to the church. “You get what you pay for.” Or so it has been said. And two percent cannot sustain a viable faith family. No church can let its light shine if it is not willing to buy oil for the lamp. Two percent only buys the match. And many churches spend most of their time sitting in the dark and blaming each other for how dim things are.

That is not us, at least not at the moment. We have some oil. We can at least find our way from room to room, and some of the rooms are starting to look a lot better than they once did. But it really is not bright yet in some of our rooms either. I truly am very grateful that it is not such a dismal picture in this church. But do you really think it's a good time to stop and rest on our laurels? The laurels aren't bad in comparison to many other churches, but I would not like to compare us yet to the standards of the Kingdom we want to belong to and to serve.

I make my promise because it is a deep biblical and spiritual principle: **We will not become the church we want to be unless we become a church of tithers.** That is not the only spiritual discipline we need to become a true church, but it is one of them.

Hey, wait a minute! This is not Stewardship Sunday. I don't have to try to raise money today. Besides, what did Jesus ever spend for the church? Well, except body and blood – all of His *energy* and all of His *life* – for the people who would be His followers, His body, here on earth.

Whatever you might think, I am not trying to raise money – just awareness. To be sure, I would love it if you all decided to tithe. If that happened, this church could do things it never dreamed of before. I happen to believe that many of you would be even happier, more fulfilled people if that happened, and in ways and for reasons hard

for some to imagine. I would like that very much. But that is not my problem. I am not in charge of your money – and I don't want to be. I am not going to try to write your pledge for you. It is between you and God, so relax; you don't have to be afraid of anything I say. Besides, you pay me well. I really appreciate it. If we stay at about the same level we are right now, it is no crisis for me. It just shortchanges the Kingdom – and your life together as Jesus' church. In any case, I want to talk about money and stewardship and tithing for a few Sundays. Maybe you already know all these things, but that is not what the ledgers show.

Anyone who spends any time reading the Gospels or dealing with Jesus is confronted again and again with the concept of stewardship. It is a radical departure from the Old Testament (First Covenant) concept of tithing. I have Christian friends who think we should stop talking about tithing altogether, since it comes from the Old Testament and we are supposed to be children of the New Testament. But the New fulfills the Old. That is not the same thing as canceling out the Old.

Tithing is a clear and precise term that refers to the giving of ten percent of your “spendable income” to the Lord, through His church (formerly the temple). The Old Covenant Law required tithing. It was seen as an obligation tantamount to a rental fee owed to the Creator for the use of earthly space and resources. The tithe was a religious tax levied by the Government of the Universe. The tithe was not a gift; it was owed. People brought “their tithes and their offerings.” That is, some people were grateful enough that they brought gifts beyond what they owed – offerings of thankfulness or adoration.

In any case, the Old Testament leaves no doubt about what God requires in this matter. If you pay the tithe, you are free to keep the rest for yourself and your own purposes – without guilt. If you keep back part of the tithe, it is equivalent to stealing from God. *“From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. But you say, ‘How shall we return?’ Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, ‘How are we robbing thee?’ In your tithes and offerings. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me; the whole nation of you. Bring the full tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house; and thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.”* (Malachi 3:3-10)

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I think that is beautiful, but *stewardship* is a very different concept. Christians frequently speak about how the New Covenant frees us from the Law of the Old Covenant. We have in this parable in Luke (12:16-12) a particularly clear illustration of what this freedom from the Law is really like. Jesus keeps cutting behind the Law to the principle – behind the words to the will of God. Jesus frees us from the obligation to pay ten percent – by pointing out that what we really owe is one hundred percent. By the law of the tithe, you owe ten percent. By the principle of stewardship, you owe one hundred percent.

Stewardship rules out personal property or private ownership, so far as our inner attitude is concerned. No Christian *owns* anything. All things belong to God. We are merely stewards. We manage all that comes to us on behalf of ANOTHER. The real owner – our true boss – is always God.

In Jesus' day, a steward was a servant, often even a slave, who lived day by day off of the estate of his master. That is, he ate the master's food, slept in a room provided by the master, dressed in clothes provided by the master. A good master took good care of his servants, but they were still dependent, from day to day, on the master's good pleasure. That was the role model, if you will, that Jesus pointed to as exemplary of our rightful relationship with God.

The steward of a wealthy master lived like a wealthy man, when in fact he owned nothing. If the master fired him, he was suddenly penniless, though just the day before he had been living like a king. Fair or unfair, it behooved the steward to take excellent care of his master's affairs and property. Fair or unfair, that is the reality between us and God. "*Naked came I into this world, and naked I shall return.*" (Job 1:20-21) Whether lands or houses or cars or children or wives or friends or trees or pets, it all belongs to God. We get to enjoy, appreciate, care for, enhance, and increase if we can – for a short time. But nothing belongs to us. It belongs to God.

From Jesus we learn that we are stewards for God. When we realize that, we are freed from the Law. Ten percent of nothing is nothing. We eat from the King's table and we have our work to do, and that is the long and short of it. We live well enough, if we take our stewardship seriously. Our Master is incredibly wealthy; he could buy the entire solar system from one day's pocket money and never even miss it. So who is to threaten us with financial worries? Our only worry is to be good stewards of whatever is put in our care.

The problem, as always, is that we feel uncomfortable with such dependence. No matter how good the Master has been to us, we are always afraid of being fired. No matter how many reassurances we have received, we worry that what we have been set over will be taken away and given to others who will manage it better. So we are forever trying to salt away something of value that belongs only to us, just in case – something God cannot get ahold of, something God cannot require of us. But all that does is put distance between us and God. That is, trying to hide things from God means we try to hide ourselves, break off communication, stop listening for what the Master wants. It is called alienation, separation, loneliness – the old word was SIN.

I have been told that “stress” is a major problem in our nation – a disease rampant in our culture – causing endless havoc and even enhancing the impact of many other diseases and disorders. Can you believe it? Where could such stress come from? It comes from ownership. If you own your children, your spouse, your house, your business, your car – that is enormous pressure, fear, responsibility. What if something goes wrong? What if you cannot fix it? What if you lose it? What if you cannot control it?

Aren't you glad we are Christians and don't have to live under any of that pressure? My God, it must be horrible! Oh, to be sure, we want to be good stewards and we work at it conscientiously. If God gives me a house to take care of, I want to take care of it for HIM. If it burns down and I do not have fire insurance, I was a pretty careless steward. I might not get another house to manage for quite some time, if I prove myself too irresponsible to be trusted. On the other hand, we do the best we can, and if something goes wrong, it is not our loss – it was God's house. If He did not want to protect it, it is His problem. And He has unlimited wealth. He can build another any time He wants. We love God and do not want anything to go wrong with God's property. We work to tend it, nurture it, care for it, and when possible increase it. But there is no stress. If something goes wrong, it is God's loss. We do not own anything – we cannot lose anything. If God loves us, he will take care of us – give us something else to manage for a while. No fear. Relax. It is fun when someONE else is taking all the risks. If there are benefits or blessings, we get to enjoy them day by day. If they go away – not our loss. *“Naked came I ... naked I shall return.”* So where is the stress? Only in my imagination. Or in my fear, if I do not know yet that God loves me.

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Of course, the more we are handed, the harder we have to work – and the more trouble it is to figure out what God wants us to do with it all. But if God gives it to us to manage, we do the best we can. Yet it is never ours, and it is never just for our benefit. *Daily bread* is for our benefit; it keeps us alive so we can go on serving the Kingdom. On the other hand, everything we ever really want is available to us in the Kingdom. I do not expect most of you to truly realize that yet, but it is still true. And we do keep realizing it a little more clearly all the time.

Stewardship is not the only analogy Jesus uses to reveal such matters. Another of His favorites comes from the once-familiar setting of the shepherd and his sheep. Us cattle barons hate shepherders, so we have a hard time with it. But since it is Jesus talking, we try to listen.

Jesus dearly loves the illustration of the sheep. He uses it again and again. One has to hunt pretty hard to find one of Jesus' teachings that does not eventually receive the sheep treatment. Today it is easy to miss the offense and the humor of these parables and stories, since sheep for most of us are cute little creatures in children's stories. In reality, sheep have such a strong herd-instinct that they seem really stupid. Without a shepherd, they get caught in brambles, fall into pits, wander off, panic, and get eaten by wolves and other predators. In times of crisis, they all do what the others are doing, which means none of them know what to do. Jesus once said of the human race that it was "like sheep without a shepherd." There is enough truth to that to make us laugh *and* cry.

On the other hand, when sheep know the shepherd's voice – and trust him – all goes well. The good shepherd calls them by name, leads them to pasture, and leads them home again. He finds them when they wander off and protects them from thieves and wolves when necessary. He even lays down his life for them.

But for all the points and principles that Jesus clarifies with His sheep stories, there is one that the disciples forgot to include in the New Testament writings. Perhaps they were afraid it would be misunderstood. In any case, here is the missing parable:

"At the proper time each year, the shepherd gets all the sheep together in some enclosure where none can escape. Then he gets out his shears and, taking the sheep ONE AT A TIME – each one individually – he shears off all the excess wool. At first, the sheep bellow and bawl

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as if they were being murdered. But afterward, they feel much better – cooler, lighter, healthier – and nothing they really needed was taken from them. And as a result, their wool grows much faster and is of a better quality. Not only does the shearing keep the sheep healthier and more comfortable, but the shepherd finds many excellent uses for the wool.”

Now, isn't that a beautiful parable? I suppose it will never bring tears to our eyes the way the story of The Lost Sheep does. Strange, in a way, that it is more appealing to be lost and wrong and get found again than it is to be healthy and productive and useful to the Shepherd. Strange that we get all choked up over the Shepherd's tireless efforts to rescue and save us – and how we marvel that He seeks us, carries us home, and sometimes even lays down life for us – and then we remain unmoved at the thought that we could be of some use and value to Him. It is even said that some of the sheep resent shearing time, as if somehow the Shepherd has no right to our wool.

Some of us know what it's like to be lost, and to be found. And we know what it's like to be sheared. We will take the shearing any day! It is joy to be useful to our Master – joy to have anything of value that He might want. Far from resenting the shearing, we only wish we could grow wool faster so we could have more to give to the Master. And the most beautiful parable we can imagine is one where, after the shearing, the Master points to His flock with pride and says, “What great sheep I have! Look at all this fine wool. You are a terrific flock and you have made your Shepherd very happy. So many beautiful things I can make with this wool. So many I can keep warm who would otherwise shiver and freeze their way through this life.”

I love the concept of stewardship even more than the concept of tithing. Tithing is still very useful because it is so clear and because it sets forth the minimum for faithful allegiance. But let us not pretend that, on the basis of going from ten percent to one hundred percent, we can end up giving two percent and still claim that we are serious about Christ's Kingdom.