

WHAT DO WE LOVE – BECAUSE OF WHO WE LOVE?
(AND BECAUSE OF WHO LOVES US?)

The covenants are all supposed to be in; traditional Stewardship Sunday is over and past; we are into thanks-giving time, and Advent is fast approaching. It's the perfect time to talk about money, our offerings, the altar, and Stewardship.

It's perfect because you know I am not trying to change your pledge. We can talk about the subject calmly, like fellow Christians – not promoter to prospects. If I wanted to be a promoter, nothing around here would be the size or shape or style that it is. We are on this Path together, trying to figure out how to walk it best, and that includes all of our foibles and realities and fears and true motives. It is not just a matter of what we want to be like; it is also a matter of where we are and what we actually are like at this point on our journey.

So it is also good that thankfulness is in our picture, and that Advent is close enough to remind us of some of the deeper themes of our Faith. To give one dime to something we do not believe in is silly at least, hypocritical in truth, and spiritually damaging at worst. In fact, in the course of our years, all of us have given lots of money to things and for things that later we regretted. That is what makes us wary. Wariness is not the enemy of Christian giving. If we are not wary, there will never be anything left for God.

The Kingdom of Heaven is in our midst, all around us, always available. It is a dimension of *shalom* (peace) and delight into which we are invited by the sheer grace and love of God. But we do have to want it, and we do have to walk “in” if we want it. Jesus not only proclaimed this Kingdom and invited us into it, He also showed us something of what a human being would be like and think like and how they might behave – if they knew of the existence of this Kingdom and lived in it.

Some of the residue of His thinking we still ponder, as in the passage read this morning and other cryptic teachings:

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth”
(Matthew 6:19)

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“Do not be anxious about food and drink to keep you alive and about clothes to cover your body. Surely life is more than food, the body more than clothes. [Can you imagine a human really thinking like this?] Look at the birds in the sky Consider how the lilies grow in the fields Seek first the Kingdom of God” (Matthew 6:25-33)

“Give, and gifts will be given you. Good measure, pressed and shaken down and running over, will be poured into your lap”
(Luke 6:38)

“Have no fear, little flock; for your Father has chosen to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give alms [to the temple]. Provide for yourselves purses that do not wear out, and never-failing treasure in heaven, where no thief can get near it, no moth destroy it. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”
(Luke 12:32-34)

These and similar passages only hint at Jesus’ thought patterns – at His attitude toward Life. It is a terrible travesty to try to reduce them to little goads for raising money for the yearly budget of an earthly organization that may or may not have any *intention* of truly loving, serving, or following Jesus the Christ.

These passages speak of an entire attitude toward Life – a living of Life in trust for LIFE, because we trust the Creator who made it. With passages like these, any of us who are running low on guilt can come and load up – and miss the whole point. Jesus is not somebody to walk with if you are looking for confirmation of how well you are doing with all your present approaches to Life. Looking for endless grace, mercy, understanding; looking for One who sees more value in us than we ever dreamed about; looking for forgiveness or hope or courage to go on – Jesus is wonderful to walk with for that. But looking for a pat on the head and the assurance that we are doing everything just right – no, Jesus is not very good for that kind of ego trip.

Walking with Jesus, we are always playing with the fathomless. He tries to cut it down to our size, but it’s hard to hold it all in, so we feel both the draw and the vertigo. How do we step “in” to this Kingdom?

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Born anew
Turning it over
Surrender
Changing priorities
A new allegiance

Each one does not so much *require* something from us; rather, it *calls* us into the new adventure: prayer, Bible study and contemplation, choosing a mentor, finding your six, seeking your vocatio – all the steps we talk about as steps along the WAY; steps on the Pilgrimage; steps we take on the way “in” to the Kingdom.

Among the steps is tithing: giving ten percent of our income to whatever church we live in. This is not the most important of the spiritual disciplines, which is not to say that it is of no consequence or that its impact would not be great. But for most people, it is the easiest and clearest of the steps we can take to enter the Kingdom. Because it reminds us of who we belong to, why we are here, who we serve, and what we believe is truly important, tithing brings us far greater benefits on the spiritual Path than we ever initially expect from it.

Most of the so-called liberal wing of Christendom has lost or forgotten the concept of tithing altogether. That is, we left the spiritual Path and started running institutions. Most churches raise budgets each year; they think it is about money. I talk occasionally with a nearby Pastor about preaching. He is a lot younger and more creative than I am, but he usually misses what it is all about. We have been talking for a long time, but he called me a few weeks ago and said, “I’m really stuck. Stewardship Sunday is coming up and I just hate to ask for money.” I said, “People love money and love to spend money for what they really want. Why would you hate to talk about such a fun subject?”

He wasn’t buying any of it, so finally I said, “Why don’t you just tell them the real reasons why you yourself tithe.” There was this long pause. Of course, by the way the conversation had been going, I already knew that he did not tithe. But he is one of those honest men, and finally I heard this sigh and he said, “You love it, don’t you? I don’t tithe.” I said, “Do most of the ministers you know tithe?” He said, “I don’t think most of them do.” “Well,” I said, “if you don’t know what you are talking about, maybe you should keep your mouth shut.”

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But what I was thinking was: If the leaders don't think the church is very important and now the people don't think the church is very important, I wonder if that could have any connection with the state and condition of the United Church of Christ in our time.

Tithing is not about money. It is about what we love – because of who we love. It is about who we serve, who we work for, what we think is important here on earth, and where we put our faith. Of course, the church *is* what its people are; that is inescapable. And what the people *give* is what they *have* – when they try to represent God's Kingdom here on earth, as Christ's Church. That is sheer pragmatics. And that has large impact on the collective life of the church, to be sure. But this Life of the faith community must flow out of the faith of the individuals who make it up, or it is all a sham. I am pointing out that tithing cannot be defended on the basis of its benefit to the institution. That is a side effect. Tithing is about our own individual response to God's mercy and to God's sovereignty.

Tithing is a subcategory under Stewardship. Stewardship is a subcategory under VOCATIO (vocation). We listen for God's personal "calling" – calling us into whatever area it is that we are to make our major contributions. The calling will match our special gifts and our true identity. In some ways, we will be training and refining our vocatio all of our lives. To whatever degree we find our vocatio, we become stewards – managers of what we find ourselves set over. Henceforth we do whatever we do "as unto the Lord," and from any income we realize from our labor, we return a tenth to the Lord. Tithing is a subcategory under Stewardship; Stewardship a subcategory under VOCATIO.

I know as I speak that some of you are not ready to receive this. I might think that is sad, but you *must* believe me when I say that my greater concern is for people who try to give above the level of their spiritual readiness. It will backfire, I promise. I hope that every one of you will end up tithing before you die. It is a great spiritual blessing to live for what we believe. But like any spiritual step, if we do it for the wrong reason, for the wrong motive, we not only miss the blessing, it backfires.

What are motives for tithing? Stewardship is *not* about generosity. It is about recognizing our true King. If you want to be generous, any gift will do. You own it all, if that's your attitude – that is, everything

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you have is yours. Therefore, anything you give is generous and more than God or God's church could deserve. A gift is a gift, after all.

Not me. I'm a sharecropper. God owns it all. Talking and working together over the years, God has given me the field of my present endeavors to "till and plant and work" for him. Where most owners would require forty or fifty or even sixty percent of the yield, God asks for only ten percent. That is, God is enormously generous. Not only that, God wants me to take good care of my family and others under my care, so even the ninety percent I keep is under the rules of stewardship. God owns it; I get to use it and do what good I can for the Kingdom. Only ten percent goes to keeping the overt fellowship of believers alive and serving in this world. It is my tribute to my King, and joyfully given.

I know that others have different motives for giving.

1.) Guilt or Fear. Will God "get you" if you decide not to tithe? No, sadly – not very much of you. In any case, there is no direct, individual punishment for not tithing; there is only an absence of blessing. Some people think the extra money can make up for it. Forgiveness is good for guilt, and faith is good for fear. But we cannot buy our way out of guilt or fear. Guilt and fear are not proper motives for our tithes.

2.) Practicality. The church needs the money to operate its program. It's hard to deny that this is the case. But none of us agree exactly on what the program is or should be or which parts of it are most important. We do have to deal with these issues *after* the tithes and offerings are in, because then we switch hats and find ourselves obligated to use God's money – for the church and as the church – the way we think would be most pleasing to God. But if that was our motive for giving, we would merely argue over issues and procedures and then withhold our money if we did not like the outcome, and maybe overgive at times as well. If I like what the church is doing, I love God; if not, I don't? Is that it? It would never work, as those who give on such a basis keep proving.

3.) Justice. What is my fair share? We will add up all the bills, and each of us will give our fair share. How appealing, on one level. It would make us feel better with each other, perhaps. It does not have much to do with God, though. That is, my relationship with God is not

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at the center of it. And who would read all our IRS forms to determine what our fair share was? Would you like to sit on the Board of Appeals? Justice and law are maybe not our best approach as a Christian church, though some within it keep bringing them up. But if you do want to know what your fair share is, Jesus mentions it. “*A merchant in search of fine pearls, upon finding one of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.*” Dealing with the Christ, “all that we have” is still not fair, but as close as we can come. Settle for ten percent; it is God’s generosity.

4.) Gratitude and Love. Do we choose commitments and disciplines because we have felt God’s caring and have caught some glimmer of how much the Holy Spirit is tracking and sustaining us and all of our kind – and what it is all heading toward? It is not hard to imagine which motives for our tithes and offerings we should be approaching God’s altar with: Humility. Gratitude. Love.

Are we here to impress somebody? Are we hear as spies, secretly working for some other sovereign or values system other than that of Christ’s Church? Did we come to make a deal? Like there is something we could ask of God that God has not already given or stands constantly ready to give? Are we going to sneak in and steal something here, without having to grow into it so it is truly ours? How strange we are – how funny in the head. How patient is the love that watches us in our antics, waiting for us to grow up and become the people of the Kingdom, as we were designed to be.

Someday it will strike you that it is not enough to move from self-centeredness to generosity – that it is not the good you can do, but who you serve that changes Life on earth. If you do not pay tribute to your King, you do not yet have a King.

Suppose there was a stranger here, a person from another church in a distant city, who happened by chance to drop in today. And suppose, in the mysteries of the Christian pilgrimage, that this person happened to be ready to receive the concept of tithing. Don’t you know that it is not the eloquence of the preachers but the readiness of the heart that makes preaching valuable to the Kingdom?

Anyway, suppose this person went home, having heard the sermon. And they make, let’s say, \$56,000 a year. So far they have

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been giving \$1,200 a year to their church – a very generous gift, if they are in charge. One-forty-sixth of their income. But arriving home, now in the joy of a new awareness, they begin giving \$466 a *month* to their church. What difference could that possibly make to their spiritual awareness?

First of all, they have to rework their entire budget. That money has to come out of savings, recreation, vacation, eating out, or someplace, doesn't it? So our unknown friend begins curtailing the clothes budget, eating out less often or at less fancy places, maybe delaying some plans to upgrade the stereo or the computer system. But all of this is done in thoughtfulness and in prayer and in joy: "Lord I love You. This is one of the ways I show it, and remind myself of Your sovereignty over me and all of Life."

Do you think that's where it will end? No, it will begin to have an impact on self-identity and on awareness of everything this person sees or does. It will change inner confidence. The deepest reliance will begin to shift off of material things. People will begin to sense a different spirit and respond differently. The person's interest in the church and what it is accomplishing will change considerably too.

In ten years of this kind of living, this person will have changed perspective in every area of Life. They will be seen differently, have different responsibilities, accomplish on a whole different spectrum of Life. And if sometimes during that ten years the motives were not quite pure – which they never are in this world – then all kinds of pride, self-righteousness, and control issues will have also come up in their prayer life – and this person's awareness and walk with the Holy Spirit will now be on a whole different plane.

Aside from that, in ten years this person will have contributed \$56,000 dollars to the life of Christ's church on earth, instead of \$12,000. Think of what they could have bought if they had kept the \$44,000 for themselves. And would it really be more important or more satisfying than a greater participation in Christ's Kingdom?

Clearly many good church folk keep saying "yes" to that question. Hey, it's okay with me as long as it's okay with you. Is it okay with your Lord?