

The Truth Behind Tithing

Part 3 of 4 of the Stewardship Series, *What Gift Can We Bring?*

Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Matthew 25:14-30 – October 24, 2010 – Browns Point UMC

Rev. Elizabeth Ingram Schindler

It seems a little crazy to me, but the internet would indicate that there's a great deal of controversy in our country over the concept of tithing, wherein a tenth of the firstfruits of our harvest go to the church. People in various Christian traditions all around the world argue about whether tithing is mandatory or just a suggestion, whether the ten percent is based on gross or net income, whether your tithe must all go to the church or if your total charitable giving can add up to 10%, etc. Especially during this recession, when church members and churches everywhere are having financial difficulties, people are arguing about tithing. There are thousands of opinions on the internet, naturally, where one essay I read from a non-denominational pastor claims that is actually a *sin* to "enforce tithing on New Testament Christians," which he cleverly calls the "fraudulent fleecing of the flock."¹

So, while it seems like it'd be much easier for us just to move to a membership dues system like many Jewish synagogues have, I thought it might be good for us to talk about tithing a little bit. But I'd like to be clear up front that I don't have the answers to all the questions: I can't tell you whether tithing is gross or net, pre-tax or after-tax, or inclusive of other charitable gifts. I don't think it's helpful for us to argue or question the details of tithing at all, because when we get bogged down in the details, we tend to miss the point. But I do think it's helpful for us to look at why we give, why 10% is a worthy goal, and why we are called to give "all we can" to the church.²

There is a biblical precedent for tithing. Abraham was the first tither, and Old Testament Jews brought 10% of their harvest to a storehouse to honor God and feed the hungry. They understood that life is a gift, and they gave in gratitude for the abundance they had received. We, too, live lives of abundant gift – even in tough economic times – and we are also called give out of gratitude, in response to the grace in our lives, to honor the One who has given us so much.

But there's another reason to give, as well – our time and our talents, yes, but also our money: it's an act of discipleship. Giving is an act of faith. Now the story we just heard from Matthew is complicated, indeed, but what strikes me most about it, is that when given something amazing, something they didn't deserve, the slaves with the five talents and two talents risked everything they had for the one who had given it. Scholars tell us that a talent is about 16 years wages – about half a million dollars in today's terms – and they risked their whole fortune to make their master happy. And the slave with 1 talent tells us that the master isn't the nicest guy: he's harsh, he reaps what he doesn't sow and gathers what he didn't scatter, so what might he do to the slave if the talent is lost? The 1-talent slave is afraid, so he buries what he's been given, unwilling to take a risk.

Many of us are tempted to bury our fortunes, too. Maybe we wouldn't bury them in the ground, like this slave, but we are tempted to decline giving, or to give much less than we

¹ <http://www.bible-truths.com/tithing.html>.

² John Wesley famously said Christians should "Earn all you can, save all you can, and give all you can."

actually could, because of fear: we fear what might happen if we don't hoard all the resources we can; we find our security in the stuff we build up around us rather than the promises of God; we put our hope in the uncertainty of riches. We fear that our worth depends on our possessions and experiences, so we grip tight to the riches we have, however large or small, thinking, "If I give, there *might not be enough left for me.*"

But the call of discipleship, the life of faith, challenges us to put our trust in God, who provides us with everything we need, who offers us a place at the heavenly banquet and a community that will pick us up when we fall. The call of discipleship challenges us to see our worth in our createdness in God's image, in God's naming of us as "beloved," not in what we have, deserved or undeserved. Giving is an act of faith: it is a discipline that helps us fight against the fears and insecurities that plague us and help us let go of control and put our trust in the One who never fails. When we give, we are saying, "I am willing to risk it all for *you*, God, because I know I would be nothing without you."

It doesn't say this exactly in Matthew's gospel, but I have a feeling that the reason the 5-talent slave and the 2-talent slave entered into the master's joy was not because they were savvy investors, but because they gave themselves up for one they loved – and in doing so, they were filled with joy, with or without the master's approval. But the one-talent slave, who wasn't willing to risk, who couldn't gain because he was so worried about losing what he had, was already in that place of darkness, where faith was only in fortune, because a greater future was beyond his imagining.

You see, giving is a step of maturity on this journey toward holiness that all of us are on – and it is one with rewards: rewards of joy and blessing and discipline and taking part in a transformation that is far greater than what we could do on our own. But we can't even taste those rewards without taking a risk for the One who has given us everything we need.

Now let me be clear: some traditions claim that you should give to the church because God will give you back – in money – more than you gave as a reward for your faithfulness. And others claim that giving enough to the church will guarantee that nothing bad will happen to us. And so members of these traditions essentially buy their security by putting money in the plate: they make a personal investment, hoping for a greater reward in the future. Now when I say there are rewards to tithing, this is *not* what I mean. Everything that I have learned about God says that radical grace and incredible abundance are ours simply because God loves us more than we will ever be able to comprehend, not because of how many dollars we have put in the offering plate. So please do not start tithing because you think it will protect you from mishaps or offer you more financial security in the long run.

But do give to the church because you are grateful, because you recognize the blessing of love and grace that is showered on you every day and you want to respond by giving. Give to the church because you believe in it, because you believe that it is the continuation of Christ's ministry in the world, that it's the best way for people to know the love of God, because it's living out its mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Give because you believe our mission is not only important but essential, that making disciples is the *best* way for our world, filled with overwhelming need and greed and hatred, to be transformed to a place of love and grace and generosity.

And give to *this* church, because it has been the hands and feet of Christ for you and you believe it can be the hands and feet of Christ for so many more. Give because you believe that

our church – *this* little church – can make a difference that no one else can make. Give because you believe transformation is possible, that God is still speaking, that love will ultimately win, because you believe that God is working in and through the people in this room to bring forth the kingdom.

And don't just give what's comfortable – don't give the extra that you don't need – don't give what you gave last year or what your neighbor gives or what your parents used to give – give *all you can...* because you believe in the gospel.

As you sit down this week to look at your budget and consider what you'll give to Browns Point UMC in 2011, when you get to every non-essential line item – cable, vacations, pretty shoes – I challenge you to ask yourself this question: "Is this expense more important to me than making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world?" And then imagine for a moment what that transformed world might look like. See how that moves you. And then, when you've discerned what proportion of your income God is calling you to give this year, make a commitment to Browns Point – make a commitment to the brothers and sisters sitting around you and to the children down in Sunday School and to the folks who haven't even visited yet.

If you do this, if you are willing to take this risk, this leap of faith, then I covenant with you that I will do all in my power- together with the other leaders of this congregation- to be a good steward of your gifts. Because I believe. I believe not in church buildings or programs or properties or budgets, but in the people in this room and in the Spirit moving among us. I believe in Browns Point United Methodist Church. I believe God is working right now, to transform us – and through us, to transform the world. And that is something worth taking a risk for. Amen.

After the sermon, I shared some information about the pledge cards that were distributed after worship and through the mail during the following week. I explained why we wanted people to put a percentage on the card – because proportional giving is more important than dollar amounts. And why I am asking, as the pastor, to see people's commitment cards. First, because I want to pray for each commitment; second, because giving, while not the only indicator, is a strong indicator for what's going on in people's lives and where people are on their faith journey, and the more I know about those two things, the better pastor I can be.

I shared that for 2011, Steven and I have committed to giving \$1,515 per month for a total of \$18,180. That represents approximately 10% of our current income. Please pray for us, that we would uphold this commitment and be faithful with the incredible gifts God has given us.