

Fit to be Tithed

Stewardship Sunday
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Malachi 3:10-12; Psalm 112;
1 Corinthians 16:1-4; Matthew 22:17-22

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

A Presbyterian, a Methodist and a Lutheran were sitting around in a coffee house, talking about pledges and giving and so on. Each of them were facing a Stewardship Sunday, something like our own, and they were discussing how they arrived at what they would give. The Presbyterian started out, "I draw a very large circle and then I draw a smaller circle and I throw my money in the air. The money that lands in the large circle is mine, and the money that lands in the small circle is God's."

The Methodist smiled and said, "You know, I do pretty much the same. I draw a large circle and then I draw a small circle and I throw my money in the air, and the money which lands in the large circle is God's and that which lands in the small circle is mine."

The Lutheran looked at both of his friends and shook his head. "Guys, I don't go to all that trouble. I just throw my money in the air and let the good Lord take what He wants!"

You see, giving to God and deciding how much to give God, seems to have been a problem from the very beginning of time. The prophet Malachi, that we heard read this morning, was criticizing the religious leaders of the time for allowing the people to become unfaithful in their tithing. Unlike the present day, many of the people at that time did not have money to give to God, but they did have goods and crops and livestock. There was no need to calculate the amount, since the amount required of them was set; it was a tithe – a tenth of what they had to give. Through Malachi, God invites the people to return to giving Him a full tenth after having fallen away. Surely there were many faint hearts that heard that request, since I am sure they thought a return to such giving was not only costly, but extravagant. But God added to the ante. He invited them to take the risk of returning to tithe and then discover that no hardship would befall them, as a result of their having taken the risk. And do you know what? That invitation, and that offer, still stands!

Thanks to Paul we got the notion of regular weekly giving so that his churches might support the poor Christians in Jerusalem. While Paul doesn't explicitly mention the tithe, he does mention that giving comes out of the money left over after has taken care of one's special needs. Though he doesn't suggest, of course, how much that giving might be.

And finally in Matthew, Jesus reminds those who question him and those who are listening that one is bound to return to Caesar what is Caesar's, and so we pay taxes, and what is God's is God's, and so we tithe!

Which brings us to what lies at the heart of stewardship as we consider the amount of our giving to God here at Trinity this coming year. Of course there is the perennial problem: how do I figure out what the tithe is? How much of my income or wealth is a tithe? Or just how much ought I to give?

Just the other week a very successful Camp Hill businessman had an appointment with Pastor Easton. Now I can't reveal his name, so we'll just refer to him as a gentleman. You see, he was very enthusiastic that we were going to be direct about stewardship. He liked the idea of Stewardship Sunday and stewardship emphasis and the prospect of pledging and filling out an estimate of giving form. But when it came to that, he felt troubled and burdened. He was anxious about how to figure out just how much he would give. And then, of course, having given it, being able to be personally comfortable with what he had done.

"You know", he said to Pastor Easton, "when I started out in business I made \$50 a week. And I tithed. I gave \$5 to God in the offering plate every week, and I felt good about that. Then my business grew and I became more stable and eventually I was earning \$500 a week. And then it was a good thing for me to do to put \$50 in the plate every week, and I felt really good about that. I saw all the good that was being done by the pastors and staff and people at Trinity. I saw how much our church meant to the people in the area. I began to see just what a great difference going to Trinity made, not only in my life, not only in the lives of others going here, but also in the lives of the people in the community touched by the ministries of Trinity.

But you know what, Pastor Easton, the man said? I'm doing really well. I'm now making \$5,000 a week but for the life of me I just can't bring myself to write a check for \$500 a week; somehow, it just seems too much. Pastor Easton and the business man sat in silence for quite some time. And then Pastor Easton flashed that smile – you know the quick smile, the sparkling eyes, when you know she's come up with an insight that you may or may value. She said to him, "Look. Let's pray about this together. I think God can help us get this straight." So they bowed their heads and Pastor Easton prayed "Heavenly Father, this gentleman really wants to be a faithful tither and be comfortable after he's done it. So why don't you reduce his income to \$500 a week?"

Should anyone else need Pastor Easton's prayers, she has assured me she'll be available after the service.

You see, the reality is we really do want to give, especially to the church. But too often we begin to think that what we're giving to is a "budget", that we're just paying the bills. But that's not what we're about. What we're really about is being able to give in a way that touches people. People give to people! Now Trinity is a place where you can give to people because Trinity's mission and ministry is focused entirely on people. But there's more: When you give to Trinity for the work it does in Christ's name, you're actually giving to God. That's what the offering plate is about. A financial gift to God, to do the work of His kingdom in whatever way it can be done. Not to satisfy some rule or obligation. Not to pay bills. Not to meet a bottom line and some budget, but for the sheer joy of giving to God, knowing that what is given will be used to bless others. After all, that's what we're about at Trinity, isn't it? God's loving, committed,

faithful, sacrificial giving to bless the people of this congregation so that Trinity can become a channel of God's grace, and an instrument of His love, and a blessing to all our members' needs.

What we really need to be able to do is give to God. Do you realize that giving to God is one of the final steps in Christian maturity? Martin Luther used to talk about it this way. He used to say, "There are three conversions. The first is the conversion of the heart, the second the conversion of the mind, and the third and most difficult of all, which is the final step in Christian maturity, is the conversion of the pocket book!"

When we love God, we give to him freely our tithe, out of thankfulness for all that He has done and is doing for us. Simply put, it is a return of a portion of our treasure. Not because it's a rule, though it is a divine obligation. And not because it pays the bills, though that surely is a part of it. But for the sheer joy of giving to God, that others might be blessed through the blessings we ourselves have received from God. I am asking you to join me in giving a portion of what God has already given us as a way of thanking Him. How can I stand here on a new hip and not be so thankful? We're thankful for God's love and His forgiveness, and we pray that it might be extended through you and your generosity to the less fortunate in our congregation and in Camp Hill and in Pennsylvania and in the United States – yes and even around the world!

It is an invitation that offers you the opportunity to love God and to love your neighbor. You see, without such love, relationships wither, communities perish, and the heart of the world grows cold and dark. Before you lies the opportunity of a lifetime. May your loving, faithful response be evident in the commitment you make to God in the estimate of giving form which you fill out. And there it is; the central element of stewardship – financial freedom. When God is our number one priority, believe it or not, the rest of our life will start to fall into place.

You see, when you really get down to it, it's not a bill that we are paying, it's a gift we've received. And it's only a portion of that gift that we return to the giver, God Himself.

It reminds me of the teenage boy here in Camp Hill who overheard his parents talking about their budget and struggling to fill out their Estimate of Giving form for Trinity. Listening to them, he thought this was an ideal opportunity to seek an increase in his allowance. That evening after supper while his mother was washing the dishes, he sat down at the kitchen table with a yellow legal pad and labored away writing. When he finished, he got up and went over to his mother, stood beside her and read this – drying the dishes and putting them away every night, Sunday night free – \$6 a week. Making trips to the store – \$1 a week. Keeping my room clean and tidy the way you and Dad like it – \$5 a week. Taking out the garbage once a week – \$3 a week. Mowing the lawns, trimming edges, dumping grass clippings, trimming bushes, raking leaves etc. – \$7 a week. Taking my clothes to the laundry and putting my cleaned clothes away – \$2 a week. Answering the phone for absolutely everybody in the house – \$1 a week. Mom, that's a total of \$25 a week.

His mother took her hands out of the soap suds and wiped them on her apron. She took the pencil and the pad from her son, smiled at him, turned the pad to a fresh page, sat down at the table and began to write. When she had finished she slid the pad across the table to her son. He read the following: for carrying you in my tummy until you were born – no charge. For nursing

you, bathing you, changing you as a baby – no charge. For carrying you quickly out of church when you were crying during the pastor’s sermon – no charge. For preparing and serving all your meals and snacks – no charge. For staying up with you all night and comforting you when you are sick – no charge. For being there to get you out of trouble, to help you solve all your problems, and for helping you with your homework – no charge. For giving up evenings out with your father, and going to concerts, and band competition and sports – no charge. As the young lad read through the list, tears formed in his eyes. He took the pencil from his mother and wrote three large words across his page. He slid it across the table to his mother and she read three words – **PAID IN FULL!**

Come to think of it, those are the words that Christ has written in His blood in the book of life beside our names.

Amen.