

INCOMES' OUTCOMES

Texts on Sunday, November 22, 2009

Deuteronomy 14:22-29 & 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

You're probably familiar with this word, tithe. People usually say it means giving to the church one tenth of your income. Now, it may be hard to do, but it sure is easy to calculate. You just move that decimal point one digit to the left, and you've got it. But who gives it? On average, neither churchgoers nor Americans in general give anything near 10% of their income to charitable causes. It seems that talking about tithing doesn't move the ball very far. Perhaps that's because we listen to talk about our financial behavior the way the New York Giants' defensive line listens to the opponent's audibles. *Defensive!* Ready to take down any talk about our money habits. Unless, of course, there is something in it for us.

Well, the funny thing about giving away money is, there is something in it for us. It's just that most of us haven't fully come to know that person inside ourselves who is most ready to benefit from our open hand and open heart—that curious, generous, wise, attentive-to-all person who is Christ alive within you. Tithing is about giving birth to Christ within. If our defensive line is quick to tackle talk about tithing, we'll save some money, but not our life.

Think about the tithe from the point of view of a faithful farmer in ancient Israel. He was to set apart one tenth of the yield of the fields and the vineyards and the herds. One tenth was easy to understand—he had ten digits—but it wasn't so easy to reckon. He had no numerical digits, no decimal point to move left or right. I am sure he counted all the newborn creatures. But what is 1/10 of 14 lambs? No doubt he counted the sheaves of wheat and the vats of oil from the presses, but it would have taken a terrific effort to find a precise tenth of his produce. Then there was the garden, yielding food every day. Excluded? Included? Who is watching anyway? Did the temple send revenue officers out to the farm? Not hardly.

The tithe was always meant to be a thing of the heart more than a rule. Jesus mocked the effort to make the tithe precise. "Woe to you . . . hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, but have neglected the weightier matters of the law—justice and mercy and faith." (Matthew 23.23) The ancient farmer knew whether his gift carried the generous intention of tithing, or whether he was holding back. Now the question is, Do you know in your heart whether your intention in giving is centered in a spirit of hope, freedom, and generosity, or whether you have made the calculation the way you do your taxes, rimmed with anxiety to keep the figure low? Or do you give *same as last year*, neglecting that in saving money too well, a person can lose the chance for new life.

The purpose of the tradition of the tithe is plain. Let go, loosen up, practice trusting that in spite of rising costs and a dogged recession, there is nothing to fear—except . . . (*here comes a surprise*) except God! That's what Deuteronomy 14 says: "Set apart a tithe of all your yield . . . that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always."

What on earth can this mean? It does not mean, *God will whack you if you don't follow the rules*. People patterned by punishment have always drummed out that bleak counsel, but don't you believe it. *To learn to fear the Lord your God always* means to learn to let go of your every earthly fear using peaceful, prayerful practices that bring your attention to the all-surrounding, all-nurturing reality of grace in which you stand, every hour of every day. That's the fear of the Lord—being so pregnant with God's peace coming to life through you that fear doesn't fit through the doorframe.

Now, I'm not there mostly and you're not there, but that's not the point. The word of the day is to "*learn to fear the Lord your God.*" It's a process. It takes practice. More and more, to choose freely

to put your attention on things that make for peace, not pain. Learning to give liberally from your income has a spiritual outcome. It helps train you in the language of faith which quiets fear. How much to give? It's not a calculation, it's a thing of the heart. You know whether your giving runs from a calculation in your head or whether it speaks the language of freedom from your heart.

Many years ago, I was a new pastor in a small village church upstate from which the previous pastor had retired. Though new to pastoring, I was hardly new to work. After years of graduate school, I was glad for work and an income again—and naturally, I had started giving to the church—well more than my pattern during grad school. But well more than a small amount is sometimes still a small amount.

That is how I suddenly felt while sorting through the clutter of the study and found the old pastor's family budget, reckoned in his own handwriting. Amounts for all the usual needs were there—and also the offering for the church. I stared at the figure. It was the full tithe, the whole 10%. My face flushed hot. I had never met the old man; the disarray in the house and the church had seemed like an epitaph on a worn-out ministry. But just now I was feeling spoken to by that man in a very lively way—questioned, not to say judged; tested, tutored in a language I did not know. Could I let go of money like that? I thought. I *could*. Why then not? I decided I *would* give like that—a proportion that I could feel. Just ten minutes before, such a figure had been to me the far side of the moon. Already now I could sense the flow and freedom in the decision.

Some years later, I told this story to that church in a sermon at this season. The treasurer came to me afterward with a funny smile on. "Great story, pastor—it's got even *me* thinking—but you know what? The *old* pastor never gave the church money like that." It seems I learned the language from the practice book of someone who wasn't fluent in it. Hey, you know that the best thing for getting a foreign language is not books, but practice.

Now, churchy talk often suggests that only church giving is giving to God. That sounds like a racket to me. God doesn't want money, God wants us—our hearts, period. When Paul praised the Macedonian churches because "they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means," he said they gave "not merely as we expected; they gave themselves—first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us." Feel that shift in the wind! Their giving, which "overflowed in a wealth of generosity . . . during a severe ordeal . . . and extreme poverty," was *not* primarily to please—or pay—Paul, or to "bear their fair share," but to *give themselves to the Lord*. In other words, give to get into the flow of the river of life. Are you getting that outcome from your income? You can. It's all about your motive in making gifts whose use you don't try to control. That's giving with a spiritual consequence. The question is not how much is needed, but how it leaves your hand and your heart.

Giving to the church is by no means the only way your generosity can help you "learn to fear the Lord your God." But there may be a way that giving to your church can prove especially powerful to transform a proportion of your income toward a spiritual outcome. Look at what the ancient farmer was asked to do with his tithe: Eat it! "In the presence of the Lord your God . . . you shall eat the tithe . . . so that you may learn to fear the Lord." And, continued the instruction, if you must travel to the annual festival, then trade the tithe of your crops and creatures for money and "buy whatever you want and eat it in the presence of God, you and your household rejoicing together." Now, I don't see how you could transport those long-ago customs directly into our time and place and get the same outcome. But let's try to feel our way into the heart of the matter.

The ancient farmer's tithe did not buy him anything he could use. It was all used up in a week of celebration. You know the tradition of Sabbath-keeping. It was, work hard six days, but absolutely do not work the seventh day. Give it up. Study, talk, make love, eat—but do not use the Sabbath to get

more money or more control over your future. Be present. The purpose of the tithe is similar to that of the Sabbath. Both are proportional gifts—one seventh and one tenth. The critical thing is to stop hoarding—i.e., worrying—and begin healing *in community*: in worship and close family gatherings on the one hand, in annual festivals on the other hand, where—I am sure you noticed this—money has been set aside so that all people, no matter how their fortunes have been ravaged by chance, disease, death, or Wall Street may come together in unity and community as one family: *resident aliens*—today, that is migrant workers, regardless of their documents; *orphans*—that is the name for everyone of any age who did not have a father or a mother when love and guidance was needed most; and *widows*—that is, everyone is who cut off from the social and economic lifelines which help carry our hope and our health. All of these, rejoicing together with you and your household—*that* is who is expected to show up for dinner in the healing community conceived in the hearts of the faithful and paid for by their tithes.

The good thing you feel here in this church can be described in many ways, but the most ancient word we have for what is at work here is communion with the Body of Christ. It is a table fellowship. The tradition of the tithe all eaten in a week of feasting offers you a test for your giving at First Church: How is it going with your incomes' outcomes? Is the table of our fellowship sagging with abundant love, so that migrant workers and lonely alcoholics and depressed widows and widowers and people who can't speak English but who already speak Jesus fluently and the unemployed and the orphans—and you name them—actually get the invitation to be one with the Body and we with them? When our giving comes godly through us, given not as a calculation of need but for making love and communion known with them we hardly know, then from our incomes out comes the spiritual communion with Christ at the kingdom table, a horn of plenty trumpeting the coming of a new world.

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