

30<sup>th</sup> Sun Ord Time/Year C/Reformation Sunday

October 27, 2019

Ps. 65; Malachi 3:6-12; 2 Tim. 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14

Stewardship Sermon Series “Sharing God’s Gifts” ~ “The Tithe”

### **Malachi 3:6-12**

<sup>6</sup>For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished. <sup>7</sup>Ever since the days of your ancestors 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?” <sup>8</sup>Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, “How are we robbing you?” In your tithes and offerings! <sup>9</sup>You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me—the whole nation of you! <sup>10</sup>Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing. <sup>11</sup>I will rebuke the locust for you, so that it will not destroy the produce of your soil; and your vine in the field shall not be barren, says the Lord of hosts. <sup>12</sup>Then all nations will count you happy, for you will be a land of delight, says the Lord of hosts.

### **Luke 18:9-14**

<sup>9</sup>He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: <sup>10</sup>“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup>The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ <sup>13</sup>But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ <sup>14</sup>I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Pastor: The Word of the Lord. *People: Thanks be to God!*

Ours is a Presbyterian faith heritage of frugality and generosity. Have you heard the rumor that the Grand Canyon was started by a Scotsman who lost a coin in a ditch?

One Sunday in worship at a wee Scottish church in the countryside by mistake, Angus put a 50 pound note instead of 5 pound note in the offering plate at church. Despite his entreaties, the minister refused to give it back to him. So for many weeks, when the plate was passed round, Angus passed it on saying, "Season ticket!"

I love this succinct Scottish prayer: "Oh Lord, we do not ask you to give us wealth. But show us where it is!"

(Source: <http://www.rampantscotland.com/humour/blhumthrift.htm>)

Each time we gather in worship, we remember and give thanks that God makes us stewards (caretakers) of all God's gifts—the resources of the earth, our time (the hours, days, weeks, months, and years of life), our talents, and our money (treasure). Our faith invites us to see the whole of life as one huge gift from God and to take care of it as an act of thanksgiving.

The concept of the tithe comes from our faith tradition to help us show our thanks to God. Much like God gives us 7 days in a week and commands us to set aside 1 day in 7 for Sabbath rest, worship, and learning, God gives us the tithe as a way to teach us discipline ourselves to be generous stewards.

A tithe simply means 10<sup>th</sup> and traditionally refers to the first 10<sup>th</sup> or 10% of a person's crop (first fruits) or income. For thousands of years, people of faith dedicate this tenth to the work of God—to take care of the place of worship (tabernacle/synagogue/sanctuary/church), to provide for leadership (priests/rabbis/clergy), and to support the mission.

In Genesis 14:18-19, it says:

“And King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High. He blessed Abram and said, “Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!” And Abram gave him one tenth (a tithe) of everything.”

The practice of tithing continues all throughout the Old Testament and is especially important in Deuteronomy; it is a Levitical law to tithe. Tithing is an act God’s people were expected to do because the tithe was God’s portion. The tithe created the storehouse that helped ease the suffering of the widows and orphans and fed the Levite priests.

So it is no surprise that by the time of the prophet Malachi, he is calling people out on robbing God of the tithe. When the people do not tithe, they were robbing God and hurting themselves. I find this idea so fascinating. Do you? How can we rob God? The only place in Scripture where someone encourages anybody to test God is here, and it is through tithing. Put the Lord to the test by tithing, and you can expect God to bless you so much that the doors of the barns will fly off their hinges!

Tithing and giving progress in the New Testament, and some people attempt to make the argument that Christians do not have to tithe because we fall under a new covenant. If that is an argument you are making to yourself today, I encourage you to re-think it. Here’s why. Jesus cares less about the exact percentage of giving than he cares about our dedicating our whole lives to God. In other words, tithing is not a destination for us as Jesus’ followers, it is one step on the long journey of living generously in our world.

Here is a quick example: remember when a young man asks Jesus what he must do to gain eternal life? (Matthew 19:16-22) Jesus tells him to keep God’s laws. The man says he does those things, but what else? Jesus said, “Go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will

have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

I did not hear Jesus say anything about making a tithe, did you? We might say that Jesus takes tithing and giving to a new level, and often he challenges by telling it slant.

The poet Emily Dickenson coined that vivid phrase years ago in this piece:

Tell all the truth but tell it slant —  
Success in Circuit lies  
Too bright for our infirm Delight  
The Truth's superb surprise  
As Lightning to the Children eased  
With explanation kind  
The Truth must dazzle gradually  
Or every man be blind —

Jesus tells it slant, dazzling us with the truth of God's grace and generosity in parables and metaphors. Another example:

"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:19-21 ESV).

Jesus tells it slant.

"Give unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21).

Jesus tells it slant.

Our gospel lesson today is about the story Jesus tells of a Pharisee and a tax collector, both going to pray. The Pharisee boasts as he prays that he's not like other sinners, and the tax collector prays much more humbly. Jesus doesn't have to tell us directly which one to act like. We just know, don't we, that there's something truthful, holy, and even generous about the behavior of the tax collector in comparison to the behavior of the Pharisee. Jesus drives the point home: "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Jesus tells it slant.

I heard a cute story about a family who went to church one Sunday. As they drove home after church, the father was complaining about everything: "The music was too loud. The sermon was too long. The announcements were unclear. The building was hot. The hymns weren't his favorites. His seat was uncomfortable." He went on and on, complaining about virtually everything. Finally, his very observant child said, "Dad, you've got to admit it wasn't a bad show for just a dollar."

I think you can place most people into one of two camps/groups: the entitled, those who complain all the time because they are continually disappointed by what the world should be doing for them. The second group is those who are grateful for things in life and who continually look for reasons to be grateful. Which type of person are you being?

Our mission at First Presbyterian is clear: to Anchor people in the grace of God and to move them (inspire them) to mission, to go out and serve. We have a stellar team of paid people to help us achieve this mission, and our ordained officers are committed to the mission too. We have many safeguards in place to manage with excellence all the gifts that people give to us, and a 161 year track record of proven behaviors to show our faith.

First Presbyterian of Fernandina Beach is a church of 835 members and an annual budget of \$899,000. Our legacy of generosity is strong, and our future is bright. In the name of Jesus Christ, I challenge all of us:

- (1) To know what we give. Take stock of how many hours we are spending on ministry, and pray for God to guide us to find the right balance.
- (2) To give thought to our involvement in ministries of the church. Pray about it and act by showing up to help. To do nothing or give nothing is in itself a conscience choice.
- (3) Look at your bank statements, pay stubs, and assets and calculate where you. Pray for God to guide you to grow in your financial giving. Giving strengthens the church, but it also helps each giver grow in faith.
- (4) I invite you to tithe and encourage you to embrace the beauty of the discipline. If a 10<sup>th</sup> is too big a leap, start wherever you can and increase by 1% a year until you reach your goal. I challenge us to make our tithes/offerings the first gift we make each month, rather than giving God simply what is leftover.

Please hear me clearly, every gift matters to God and to our ministry. God loves us no matter what we give. Some people give sacrificially and the amount is small, but the love and gratitude behind the gift are really large. Just imagine all the lives we could touch, all the good we could do, if more in our community got a little more serious about giving.

You will see on the bulletin insert today that 24% of our annual budget comes from 12 units. If we all were to take one step of growth, imagine what good we could do. What problems could we solve? Suffering ease? Good news shared in Jesus' name?

We make a living by what we get, and we make a life by what we give. All followers of Jesus Christ are asked to surrender to God, to yield to our own ways of acting and pattern our actions after the generosity of Jesus.

I want to tell you a true story about such surrendering, such yielding as an act of faith. Jason and Rachel, parents of 4 young boys, who learned about tithing and first fruits from their local church. It solidified for them that when they opened a new business, they decided that they wanted to give their first check from their new business to God. So they did. They made the decision to yield a gift to God one year before their business opened.

Flash forward a number of months, they anticipated being profitable. Jason told Rachel the amount, and she asked, "What was the amount we had given that first month? Jason looked back and says that's when he put it all together. Not only did God allow us to be profitable in this month that we didn't know it was going to happen, but God blessed our socks off with making it 100 times what we had given him at the beginning not knowing if any other payment was going to come in besides that first one.

You know God first is how we want to live. God first is how we parent our boys. God first is how we need to treat each other. God first is how we started and how we want to continue our business, and so when God asks us to tithe; it is not just in obedience to God, it is because life is best when we do that. God loves us like any good Father would and God knows how life is best."

(Source: <https://12stone.com/watch/more/jason-rachels-tithing-story>)

God first. It has a nice ring to it, and that is what stewardship is all about. God first.

To God be the glory. Amen.