

October 7, 2018
The Tithe that Binds
Deuteronomy 26:1-11
John 13:34-35
Michael Stanfield

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.’ *Words from God for the people of God. Let us pray. Let the words of my mouth and meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord Amen.*

My grandmother was an avid crossword puzzle worker. So are both of my parents. Evidently, the apple doesn’t fall too far from the tree because I am too. Part of the reason I continue to get a physical paper is that I like working the daily puzzle. Well, for years, in the Maryville, TN paper, the “Dennis the Menace” cartoon was always placed right next to the crossword. So part of my daily routine was to read that as well. One particular installment of that cartoon stuck with me and has never left.

It shows Dennis and his friend Joey leaving Mrs. Wilson’s house, their hands full of cookies.

Joey says, “I wonder what we did to deserve this.”

Dennis answers: “Look, Joey, Mrs. Wilson gives us cookies not because we’re nice, but because she’s nice.”

I love that because it pretty well sums up God’s relationship with us. God loves us not because we’re nice, but because God is nice. All the blessings we have, we have because of God’s extraordinary love for us. We therefore bear witness to that love (or don’t) by the way we live in God’s community, the church – by the way we live, by the way we love, by the way we give.

Today we are commanded to love one another in a way that demonstrates something extraordinary – and *that is* the love that Christ showed us.

And what is that love all about?: the willingness to give all *to* and *for* the world: selfless, sacrificial, giving.

Now, we usually associate sacrificial giving with nothing but heartache – right. But think for a moment about the most generous people you know – the ones willing, literally, to give the shirt off their backs for you and others. Got the image? Now, would you say that this person is among the happiest people you know or the saddest? The absolute happiest – right?

Well, scientists have corroborated that experience: In study after study, they have discovered that one’s level of happiness is in direct proportion to one’s willingness to give to others.

In a paper published in the journal of *Science*, researchers ran experiments that tested the effects of charitable giving.

In one experiment, they gave people anywhere from \$5 to \$100 and simply told them that they had to do something with the money by 5 p.m. The result? Regardless of the amount of money they received, those who gave the money away reported a significant spike in their happiness compared to when their day started. Those who spent the money on themselves did not.

Another group of researchers followed a group of employees who had received a year-end bonus. Those who engaged in what the sociologists labelled “prosocial spending” that is cashing out a large chunk of the bonus on gifts and charitable donations, reported being in a markedly better mood than those who did not.

This is all very interesting since ad campaigns bombard us with the message (from the time we are tots) that we’ll be much happier if we spend all our money on ourselves. And that’s exactly what most people do. But affluent folks who hold onto their money are actually among *the most* unhappy people in the world. As one of the most affluent countries in the world, that means, of course, that our citizens are generally unhappy with what they have.

It’s because we have been sold a bill of goods which is this: Only when you have “enough” can you be happy. And what is “enough”?

“Enough” is the fake rabbit that greyhounds chase at the dog tracks in Kansas City – a lure that is not real but that we yet chase after anyway. It is the next best upgrade – whether that be a cell phone, a car, or a house – dangled out there in front of us that we can’t resist running after.

So, “enough” is never enough. Meanwhile, the message of our culture is that if you don’t *have* enough, you either need to work harder at it or find someone to blame. Politicians these days exploit this fact to no end.

But there is an antidote to this madness. It is to turn away from self to God and God’s community, experience the love and generosity there and decide to participate in it.

Jesus says that as his friends and disciples we are to love each other in a demonstrable way that sets us apart. “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

A huge part of that is the generosity we show to each other in what we are willing to contribute to our life and ministry together. Generosity of spirit. After the week of witnessing the shameful spectacle of Kavanaugh’s confirmation to the supreme court, we all know the world could use more of that – because this idea of practical generosity is not just some shallow ploy. It’s transformative.

People who have close-knit social networks bound together by what they give to and for each other tend to be happier and healthier than others. Sick people in such communities get well faster; people in such communities, in general tend to live longer.

When we demonstrate our peculiar Christ-like love practically by spending money nurturing our

connections in the network we call “church,” it not only produces much more happiness in us, it creates a larger happiness field that is both palpable and contagious.

Material things offer us only weak and transient ties that eventually wear out and are trashed. Money can’t buy happiness, as the old saying goes, but giving it away to a community of love and integrity (to which we ourselves are invested) provides us with an experience that just might!

It is really what both of our morning scripture passages are about. In Deuteronomy, at the heart of the covenant community that God saved from slavery and established anew was: gratitude. And that gratitude was marked by: 1. A remembrance of all God had done for them and 2. Giving generously; tithing – giving one tenth of one’s income to and for that community.

Thus, it could be said, from a biblical point of view, that giving 10% is truly the “Tithe that Binds.” It binds us together in God.

And in our passage from John, Jesus tells us that the way we love each other is a witness to the world about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Our generosity to one another is an indication of that love. And so, what we give is a *spiritual* issue; maybe even the most *basic* spiritual issue.

Of course, this idea challenges the view that is so popular in the Western world – one that assumes that spiritual things are superior to material things and that one has little to do with the other. A Christian view, on the other hand, recognizes that *the handling of material things is a spiritual matter and vice versa*.

This speaks volumes, not only to how much of our income we keep or give, but how we keep our bodies, how we react to the way our country is being torn apart, and how we take care of the planet on which we live.

You could, in fact, make the case that *taking care of what we have been given and working towards a tithe are the most important of the spiritual disciplines*. It is one thing to engage in the more “spiritual” discipline of prayer for others, for example, but quite another to back up one’s prayers with a financial gift that requires one to work for what one prays for. Where we put our money *is* where our hearts are in a very real sense.

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples,” says Jesus. “If you have love for one another that is like the love I have shown you.”

And what is the love of Jesus like? A loving that is willing to give all – life itself for the beloved.

So, maybe we need to think about tithing in a whole different way. Instead of thinking about the tithe as an *obligation* to God, one that we all thought Jesus came to set us free *from*, maybe we need to contemplate the *blessing that God has built into the discipline of tithing*.

I am not talking prosperity gospel here; that is, if you give a certain amount, God will bless you in these very specific ways a hundred fold, but rather some of the real upsides of tithing. Indeed, this could be why God calls for the tithe in the first place. Read Deuteronomy 26 and it

becomes pretty clear that God establishes tithing as the foundation of the covenant community of faith – one that extends all the way back to their ancestor, Jacob, a “wandering Aramean”, an “alien” in a strange land who was dependent on God for everything. The community of his descendants became a nation that God rescued from slavery and to whom God gave a home.

Because of God’s provision for God’s people, they are then to bring together the first fruits of their produce and labor, to celebrate with everyone, including the aliens who live among them – to celebrate (quote) “all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house”.

The giving of the tithe extended God’s people to the most vulnerable people in the land, including the aliens, orphans and widows, whom the Deuteronomist reminds us are to “eat their fill within your towns”.

And not only did the tithe widen and nurture those considered God’s own, it *brought blessing and happiness to the giver*. “Look down from your holy habitation, from heaven, and bless your people Israel and the ground you have given us ...” says the tithing prayer.

This isn’t God acting like a cosmic vending machine who spits out material goods for those who tithe, but rather this is God responding to the giving of the tithe with blessings that can be shared with the whole community of faith and beyond!

Ask anyone who tithes and he or she will likely tell you how great it has been for him or her. People who tithe tend to experience God’s blessing in unique ways that can continue to be shared.

Take my mother and father, for instance. One year, they actually had an IRS agent apologize to them, thank them for their generosity and give them money back that he said the government owed them. That’s right. My mother and father have always tithed and it was also a year they were asked to give to a major building project at their church. They gave so much to the church that they got flagged. But the agent that looked into it discovered that, not only did my parents give what they said they gave, they actually didn’t give themselves enough credit for other charitable giving for which they were due money back.

My parents have always been fiscally conservative Republicans. But that personal encounter softened their whole attitude toward taxes and the government.

Now Tithing doesn’t guarantee us that, someday, the IRS is going to show up on our doorstep with an oversized check. What it does guarantee, though, is that we can experience great happiness in knowing that we are participating in God’s great social network and covenant community called the church – a network of love that is called to expand into every corner of the world to reduce suffering and share the good news. So, *Tithing is not really about giving until it hurts, but rather, giving until it feels really good.*

It’s not a coincidence that the apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 9:7, “God loves a cheerful giver” – because he is not saying, “give ‘til it hurts” but instead “give ‘til you are bursting with

laughter!” Tithing is a discipline that brings us joy because it brings joy to others, making all our connections overflow with possibility.ⁱ

Friends, you will soon be asked by your session to carefully consider your giving for the coming year. How will you demonstrate the same love that Christ showed you? What is God calling you to keep from the abundance God has given you? What is God then calling you to give back to the community?

This is not about the need of the receiver, in this case the budget of the church, to grow financially. In fact, the projected challenge budget for 2019 according to the ministry needs of our various church committees is projected to be modest – less than a 2.6% over this year’s budget. So, this is rather about the need of the potential giver – that is you – to ask, “What is God calling me to keep from the bounty of what God has given me and what is God calling me to return as an example of Christ’s love for me and a tool of blessing in the church and the world?”

You are encouraged to contemplate this over the next three weeks and then bring a pledge card that you will receive around the middle of October – to worship on October 28. On that day we will celebrate together our giving in worship followed by a lunch.

What is God calling you to keep from the bounty God has given you? What is God calling you to give? And this is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you.

Let us pray. Most Gracious and loving God. We thank you for the bounty you have provided us. Help us to determine what you are calling us to return in 2019. And now accept this portion of our incomes that we return that it may be a tool of blessing and joy in the world. Amen

ⁱ Homiletics, Volume 25, Number 1, January/February 2013, pg 15.