

Stewardship Sunday: We Are What We Give

Deuteronomy 26: 4-10

Matthew 6: 19-21

Sermon preached at Foundry United Methodist
on Sunday, September 29, 2002
by Rev. Dean Snyder

This morning, as part of our Blossom in God stewardship theme, I would like to share the way Jane and I think about giving in our household. We try to follow three biblical principles of giving.

I am not a literalist, so in reading and studying the Bible, I am not looking for laws to follow but principles to guide my own thinking and behavior. I am interested in what the Apostle Paul calls the spirit, not the letter of the law.

Also, I am not sharing the principles Jane and I try to follow in order to tell you what to do. We each must decide for ourselves how we feel called to handle the resources God gives us. I am not trying to say that you should do what we do. I am hopeful that sharing how we have come to think about giving might help you wrestle with your own practices, not to simply adopt ours.

So here are three biblical principles of giving:

First, there is the principle of the tithe (the principle of the tenth), or the principle of proportional giving. The principle of the tithe is not about the church's need for money, but about our need to give.

Giving is part of our spiritual life. Jesus put it this way: "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." Notice that he did not say the reverse. He did not say that we invest our treasure in what we care most about. He did not say, Where your heart is, there will your treasure be also.

What he said was that what we spend our money on is what we will eventually come to care most about. Our affections follow our check books and Visas. We come to care about what we spend our money on.

I had barely heard of Emory University. Then our daughter Naomi decided to attend Emory. So for several years, I wrote out what was to us a hefty check every month to Emory University.

Every time, I saw the name Emory University in a newspaper or magazine, or heard it mentioned on the radio, I stopped whatever I was doing and paid close attention.

My attention and interest followed my check book. I came to care about what I was spending money on.

A couple years ago Jane and I got a new car. My experience with cars is that as long as I am writing out a check every month for the car payments, I take great care of that car. I get it serviced the minute that little light goes on in the dashboard. I wash it. When it gets dinged or scratched, I take it to the body shop and get it fixed.

But as soon as it is paid for and I am not writing out a check every month, I get lazy. It doesn't get serviced as quickly. It doesn't get washed as often. And the scratches and dings become more tolerable.

There is something about writing out that check every month that makes me care more for that car.

Our affection follows our checkbook. We come to care about what we spend our money on.

And, in my experience, if spiritual things are going to be a priority in my life, I need to invest my resources in God's mission and ministry. And the Bible seems to think that in order for God to be a significant priority in our life, we need to invest at least ten percent of our resources in God's work.

So that's what Jane and I try to do. Our pledge for next year is \$250 a Sunday, which is about a tenth of what we project at this point that our income will probably be.

I don't report that to you because I am particularly proud of that amount. I have a gut feeling that we are so fortunate, that it should be higher. If it were higher, I believe God would be an even higher priority in our lives.

But we have come to believe that this is the minimum we need to pledge for the sake of our spiritual life - not because the church needs money, but because we need to give.

During the times when we have moved and we've been between churches, we gave our tithe to whatever church we happened to attend on any particular Sunday. As soon as we had a church home, we would give our tithe to God through our church home.

One Sunday after we had moved and we had not yet found a church home, I was the guest preacher at a rather large and affluent church. When time came for the offering, I reached out to put a check in the offering plate. The pastor stopped me, and said, "You are our guest this morning. You don't need to give."

I didn't say anything to him then. But after the service, I handed him my check and said, "I know you have a big budget and you don't particularly need my check. It wouldn't make that big a difference to you. But you need to take it because I need to give it. If God is going to be at the place in my life this week that I want God to be, I need to give it."

I am not telling you what you should do, but this is the way Jane and I have come to think about giving - we aim for a tenth of our income to God through our local church. A tenth is not a legalism. When people talk to me about their giving, and say they wish they could tithe but aren't there yet, I encourage them to begin at whatever percentage of their income they feel they can manage right now - three percent, or five percent, or whatever, and then try to increase their commitment a percentage point a year until they are where they think they want to be.

An older woman at a church where I was a guest preacher once told me that years ago she started at five percent, and she increased her giving a percent of her income a year a year until she reached ten percent. It became so meaningful to her that, even after she'd reached a tithe, she decided to just go ahead and increase it another percent. At the time she told me her story, she was giving to 21 percent of her income to God. She said she hoped that she could keep going the rest of her life until she was giving almost everything she received to God. When her time came to leave this earth, she said, she hoped she'd have almost nothing to hold her affections here.

So the first principle Jane and I try to follow is tithing, or proportional giving.

The second biblical principle is the principle of first fruits - giving to God the first fruits of the harvest,

rather than the leftovers. We try to make our tithe the first check we write each week.

One of the things I have learned over the years is that I have an almost inexhaustible capacity to consume.

There is no bicycle that has every been built that is so expensive that I haven't wanted it. There is no gadget made for bicycles that is so esoteric that I haven't felt I needed it.

I started out with an inexpensive hybrid Schwinn. Then I needed a computer to tell me how fast I was going and how many miles I put on my bike. Then I needed panniers to carry things in. Then I need biking shoes. Then I needed a road bike, and it had to be a LeMond. Jane talked me into getting a LeMond Nevada City, but now I've got my eye on this LeMond Tourmalet, which costs three times as much my Nevada City, but I am convinced it would take me even faster and further than my Nevada City.

I apparently have an almost inexhaustible capacity to consume.

Jane doesn't want me to walk into work anymore. It takes me about 45 minutes to walk from our home to church. When I walk I usually take Pennsylvania Avenue, and then turn on 12th Street. This takes me right past the Barnes and Noble, where I usually decide to stop, and end up leaving with three or four books and a couple magazines.

Jane says that my walking to work is too expensive for our household budget. Apparently I can not walk past a Barnes and Noble without needing to buy something.

My capacity to consume is almost inexhaustible.

The biblical principle of first fruits is to prioritize God in our lives by making our tithe the first money we spend. We try to do that.

The third principle we try to follow is one I call the storehouse principle, based on Malachi 3: 10, that says "Bring the full tithe into the storehouse so there might be food in my house," or as the older translations put it, "So there might be meat on my table."

This was probably the hardest principle for me. I was first exposed to it when I became the pastor of a primarily African-American church in North Philadelphia in a neighborhood considered one of the most poverty-stricken in Philadelphia.

A while after I was appointed there, I looked at a report on the levels of giving to the church, and I discovered that I was not one of the top givers at the church, as I had been at my previous churches. This surprised me. I knew my members probably weren't making dramatically higher incomes than I was, so I asked them why they gave so much.

They introduced me to the principle of the storehouse. Before I went that church, I had a tithe fund, where I put a tithe of my income. I gave about half to the church and the other half to my college, charities, social change organizations and other good causes. My church folk in north Philly told me that their practice was to view the first 10 percent of their income as belonging to God, to be used explicitly for church ministry. Then, if they wanted to support other causes, they would do it out of their 90 percent. The tithe was originally used to support the building and maintenance of the temple, to sustain the priesthood, music, and education.

The Bible, for example, distinguishes between the tithe and alms. The tithe advances the worship of and teaching about God. Alms are a form of charity to care for the poor. We ought to give alms and support charities, my members told me, but not at the expense of supporting specifically God-centered ministry.

"Why should the church skimp and do things for God halfway, while God's people are using their tithes for discretionary giving?" my folk would argue.

So, during our time in North Philadelphia, we began to transition from using our tithe as a slush fund to support good causes and began to dedicate it to specifically religious ministry by giving it to our church. We then began to donate to college, movements, charities and other good causes out of our remaining income.

One of the benefits of this for me was that I believe I grew spiritually as a result of giving up control over my tithe -- not directing it to where I thought it should be used, but using other money for designated contributions. There were times during the years that I was not a pastor when I wanted to say to church council, "I don't want you using my money that way," and I would tell myself, it wasn't my money. I've found thinking about my tithe this way spiritually helpful.

These principles that Jane and I try to follow are not laws. They are not legalisms. I do not know what I would do if our income suddenly plummeted to a much lower level.

And I am not telling you what I think you should do. Each of us needs to find our own path.

But let me just say this word of testimony: I have never regretted one cent I have given to God. I've regretted spending other money in the way I did sometimes, and wish I could have it back. But I have never regretted one cent we gave to God. Giving has become such an important part of my spiritual life, such a pleasure, that I wish I had given more sooner.