

Pastor's Message – 3/6/22
Deuteronomy 26:1-11

When I moved up to Shell Lake for my previous appointment, I had to change cell phone carriers because Shell Lake was outside their service area and, since I was doing more texting, I upgraded from a “flip” phone to a “smart” phones. On the new “smart” phones is an app called Flipboard: an on-line news magazine. Somehow, I kept getting articles about happiness: how to be happy, the 7 things happy people know or do or avoid, etc. For some in our culture, happiness is about things and having things.

Maybe you watch television programs or, maybe you watch You Tube videos, but on either medium and seeming everywhere in life, even at the gas pump, we cannot avoid advertisements and commercials for this or that product or service. Most of the ads, not all, but most of the ads, seem to be about accumulating things as if things could lead to happiness and fulfillment.

Advertising tells us that we'll be much happier if we spend money on ourselves, and that's what many people do. But rich and self-centered people tend to be unhappy people in the long run (just look at the tabloids next time you check out at the supermarket). So, how can it be that giving money away might make us happier and more fulfilled than spending it on ourselves?

What is it that nourishes our souls? It's not television, not video games, not sports, not cars, not clothes, not houses. Not rules, not a specific vocabulary, not a particular church. It is, rather, bread from heaven that is the elixir of life. Abundant living is an attitude, which is a result of a relationship with the Holy One. Nourishment for the soul comes from awareness of beauty and truth that are experienced in the Great Mystery we call God/Christ/Holy Spirit.

There are studies that show that tithing, i.e. giving 10% of your income, can actually make you happy! Our Bible reading from the Book of Deuteronomy today sets up ways to express personal gratitude within the context of the gathered community which is, for Christians, the church.

You might think that a Message about tithing would seem to be out of place on the First Sunday of Lent. Most churches, after all, conduct their stewardship campaigns in the fall when people are thinking about year-end tax deductions, gift-giving at Christmas time, and creating the church budget for the coming year. With all that energy spent trying to get people to open their checkbooks in the fall, why bring up tithing now when Lent is supposed to be about discipline, repentance, prayer, and a whole host of other "spiritual" stuff?

Well, just speculating here, but perhaps the reason we have this reading from Deuteronomy on the First Sunday of Lent is that tithing is a *spiritual* issue; maybe even the most basic spiritual issue. This is a text that challenges the false Platonic dualism that is so popular in the Western world -- a worldview that

assumes that spiritual things are superior to material things and that one usually has little to do with the other. A biblical worldview, on the other hand, recognizes that *how we handle material things is the basic indicator of how we're going to handle spiritual things as well*. One has everything to do with the other.

You could, in fact, make the case that *tithing is one of the most important spiritual disciplines* we can engage in, right up there with prayer and Scripture reading and fasting. It's quite easy for us to engage in the more "spiritual" disciplines of prayer for others, for example, but quite a different thing to back up one's prayers with a sacrificial financial gift that requires us to work for what we pray for. The discipline of tithing forces us to put our money where our mouths and hearts are in a very literal sense.

Too often, however, churches talk about tithing like people talk about going to the dentist -- no pain, no gain. We often soft-pedal it (it really won't hurt that much -- only 10 percent, right?) or we talk about the alternatives (You don't want the church to decay or even close, do you?). But people still tend to avoid tithing like they avoid the dentist, assuming that it will bring them pain in the wallet. The average American family only gives less than 3% of its income on average to charitable causes, and only 5% of Americans actually tithe 10% of their income to charity. This percentage seems to hold true whether the economy is up or down.

But what if we talked about tithing in a whole different way? What if, instead of talking about the *obligation* to God, we talked about the *blessing that God has built into the discipline of tithing*? We're not talking prosperity gospel here, but rather some of the real upside of tithing. Tithing, as a study in *Science* magazine has demonstrated, may indeed be the key to happiness as well as strong social networks, including the network we call "church."

Indeed, this may 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 social network of his people -- a social network that extends all the way back to their ancestor, a "wandering Aramean" (Jacob) and "alien" in a strange land who was dependent on God for everything (v. 5).

I've heard it said that the worst thing for a Church is to be debt-free. People will think that as long as there is money in the bank or investments in the United Methodist Foundation, their giving isn't important or necessary. We sometimes forget that the reason those savings are there or there is money invested in the Foundation is because they have been given from God's providence. We enjoy those savings or investments because of grateful people of faith.

Our reading today mentions "first produce." "First produce" or "first fruits" giving reflects an ancient tradition that the land and its produce belong to God. "First fruits" literally refers to the first crop harvested, considered the prime part of the harvest. Offering first fruits expresses faith in and gratitude for God's providence. Our passage today and Deuteronomy 26:13-15 relate two traditions of first fruits offerings. This tradition of first fruits giving invites us to be

stewards who are grounded in gratitude and give from what comes first, not from what is “left over.”

One striking feature from our Bible reading today is the centrality of God’s giving. While the action called for is the first fruits offering, we are reminded of God’s providential and saving activity. The land, the harvest, the bringing out of Egypt: all are attributed to God’s works on behalf of Israel.

I believe “first fruits” has to do with bringing the best that we have to offer. It’s about the promises of prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness we make as Professing Members of the Church. It’s about giving our whole lives over to God when we commit ourselves to believing in Him and following His Son, Jesus, as disciples.

Many people connect Lent with giving something up. Maybe you will be deliberately setting something aside for the next forty day. Maybe it will be a tithe? Or maybe your tithe might not be money, but time? Maybe you could get up early and set aside the first hour for God? Maybe you could commit yourself to an hour of service every week this Lent?

Deuteronomy recounts the instructions given to the Israelites for an offering of first fruits of the harvest. This offering would have occurred several times in a year, depending on which crop was being harvested at the time. This ritual was more than a form of words and gestures. It was a concrete, lived confession that connected the labor and fruits of each harvest, and so the life and livelihood of those offering, directly to God’s mighty acts of deliverance from Egypt and provision in the Promised Land. It functioned not just as a symbolic reminder, but rather as a repeated real-time embodied enactment of who these people were because of who God is and what God had done.

A study by the Barna Research Group a while back found five reasons why Christians do not give more to their churches. In the words of the study's director, George Barna: "Some people lack the motivation to give away their hard-earned money because the church has failed to provide a compelling vision for how the money will make a difference in the world.... The second group are those who see their giving as leverage on the future. They withhold money from the church because they do not see a sufficient return on their investment. The third segment is comprised of people who do not realize the church needs their money to be effective. Their church has done an inadequate job of asking.... The fourth group is composed of those who are ignorant of what the Bible teaches about our responsibility to apply God's resources in ways that affect lives. The final category contains those who are just selfish. They figure they worked hard for their money and it's theirs to use as they please." Some people may fit into more than one of these categories.

I think it’s easy to fall into any of those categories. And maybe you’ve struggled with how much is enough to give. I’ve got a couple suggestions.

There was one prosperous church member who was called upon to make a commitment for the year's giving to the church. "I'll give you my mite," said the well-to-do church member. "Do you mean the widow's mite?" asked the caller. "Of course." "Well, I'd suggest you give 10% of a widow's mite," said the caller. "That works out to about \$7,000 a year or just under \$135 a week."

"Come on!" said the wealthy church person. "How do you figure that out?" "The widow's mite was all she had. It was everything she had to live on. Check it out in your Bible (Mark 12:41-44). Your family income is about \$70,000 a year. Work it out for yourself."

Or maybe you go out to dinner occasionally at a restaurant where it is expected that you will leave a tip. Let me tell you a parable:

Now it came to pass on a day at noon that I was the guest of a certain man. The lunch was enjoyed at a popular restaurant, and the waiters were very efficient and the food was very good. Now when the end of the meal was at hand, the waiter brought to my host a check. My host examined it, frowned a bit, but made no comment. But as we rose to depart, I observed that he laid some bills under the edge of the plate; however I do not know how many, but the waiter, who stood nearby, smiled happily, so I interpreted that the tip was satisfactory.

Now we are all familiar with this custom and this parable is not about the merits or demerits of tipping. But as I meditated upon the coins and bills that become tips throughout our nation, I began to think of tips and tithes. For the proverbial tip should be at least 10% if the waiter is not to turn against you, and these days it is more like 18-20%.

As I continued to think on these things, it came to me that very few people who go to church treat their God as well as they do their waiter, for they will give to the waiter more than a tithe but they give to God whatever they think will get them by.

Do we love our waiters more than we love our God; do we rely on him more than our Lord and Savior? Those who have ears to hear, listen.

Ask anyone who is tithing and he will likely tell you how great it has been for him. People who tithe tend to experience God's blessing in unique ways that can continue to be shared. Tithing doesn't guarantee us that, someday, Publishers Clearing House is going to show up on our doorstep with an oversized check. What it does guarantee, however, is that we can experience great happiness in knowing that we are participating in God's great social network called the church -- a network that is called to expand into every corner of the world. *Tithing is not about giving until it hurts, but rather, giving until it feels really good.*

It's not a coincidence that when Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 9:7, "God loves a cheerful giver" the root word for "cheerful" is the Greek word "*hilario*" (from which we get the word "hilarious"). That's not "give 'til it hurts" but instead "give 'til you giggle!" Tithing is a discipline that brings us joy because it brings joy to others.