

Trinity United Methodist Church

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“First: The Challenge”

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Scripture: Malachi 3:6-12

“I the Lord do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. Ever since the time of your ancestors you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you,” says the Lord Almighty. “But you ask, ‘How are we to return?’ ‘Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask, ‘How are we robbing you?’ In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse—your whole nation—because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the Lord Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not drop their fruit before it is ripe,” says the Lord Almighty. “Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land,” says the Lord Almighty.

Sermon

Would you pray with me? Open our ears and our hearts, oh Lord. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

One of the great little features on my banking app is the tipping calculator. Did you ever use one of these? It's great and fantastic because in the “olden days,” before such things, you got the bill at the end of a meal out and you had to figure out the tip in your head or maybe on the back of the receipt. And I always hated that because I'm horrible at math to begin with, and especially math in my head. So I love the tipping calculator. All you do is you put in the final amount of the bill. Mine has a little slider that you slide with your finger across based on what percentage of tip you want to give, and then it will tell you what the tip is going to be and even does the math for you and tells you what the total is going to be. And then – it gets even better – if you're out with

friends and you're splitting the bill, it'll give you the option to split it by however many people you're splitting with and tell you what each person owes. It's fantastic. I love it.

But something happens with tipping, at least when I go out to eat. I don't know about you. But there's times when I have gotten fantastic service. The waitstaff has been absolutely Johnny on the spot, they keep the drinks flowing, they anticipate my needs before I know what my needs are, they're always so pleasant; it's like they want to make your night as enjoyable as possible. And on those opportunities, when it comes time to tip, I tend to slide that scale more to the higher end. And then when it tells me the tip and some-odd change or whatever, I'll tend to round up to the nearest dollar when I have an experience like that. How about you?

But then the inverse is typically true as well. If it's been a horrible evening, a horrible experience, and it's been because the waitstaff has been completely inattentive, they've had the most horrible attitude ever, like it's an inconvenience for them to do their job and wait on you, you have to wave them down just to get a water refill and things like that, then maybe we slide that scale back to the lesser end of the spectrum. And whatever it tells us, we might round *down* to the nearest dollar. And it becomes, what's the *least* amount of money that I'm obligated to give this person this evening? At least that's how my experience tends to go. I don't know about yours.

Well, the question I want us to consider today is, when it comes to our life of faith, are we tippers or are we tithers? Do we tip God, or are we tithers?

There's a lot of confusion in the life of the church as a whole, not just this church but many churches, especially Methodist churches, where we don't talk about money all that often, of what exactly is meant by the "tithe." The tithe from scripture at its most basic is one-tenth of whatever your income happens to be. Now, in Old Testament days, your income was produce, or grain, or wine, or livestock. And certainly as the times have gone along, not as many of us grow grain or produce wine or oil or raise livestock, although I will point out that after the 8:30 service Jerry Dashiell came out and said, "I'm glad you clarified that for me this morning. I'll bring you some fertilizer next week."

Indeed, a tithe is simply one-tenth of our income. It's meant as a sacrifice. Deuteronomy tells us the tithe is a sacrifice that we give in gratitude to God for God's provision in our lives. There's debate in Christian circles of, "didn't Jesus fulfill the law? We can eat pork as Christians (Smithfield is very thankful for that); we don't have to follow a lot of those Old Testament laws. Is tithing one of those that we should continue to follow?" We'll get into a bit of that in a minute. But it was meant, first and foremost, to be in gratitude to God for God's provision in our lives. It was, of course, collected by the temple and then the church for use in providing for the needs of priests and the needs of the ministry to continue.

The scripture goes along and begins to talk about the tithe as being the first fruit of our labors, whereby we are meant to take ten percent right off the top of our income. As soon as that payday hits, take that ten percent right off the top and give it to God through the church. To do so demonstrates a faithfulness to God. It demonstrates our dependence on God, our trust in God to provide for our every need.

A lot of times more of the inverse tends to be true. We focus on taking care of our needs first, and then we tell ourselves if there's anything left over, I'll give that to God. But let's face it, how often is that really true?

A man once met with his pastor. He was starting out in his career and he was moved by the Spirit to begin tithing right away. At the time he was making \$40 a week, so he promised to tithe \$4 a week. The pastor was overjoyed at this news, glad that this young man was stepping forward in faith, and he prayed with the young man. He prayed for God to bless this young man's career. Well, as time went along, after several years and many promotions, his income had grown to the point where he was then tithing \$500 a week. He called the pastor and asked the pastor if he could somehow be released from his promise because it was getting too expensive for him to continue to tithe in that way. And so the pastor said, "Well, I don't believe I can help you break free from your promise to God, but I will certainly pray for God to reduce your income back to \$40 a week, where you're more comfortable with tithing."

You see, tithing helps shift our mindset from that of scarcity to that of abundance. Whether we make \$40 or \$4,000 a week, when we give that first ten percent, that can seem like a lot of money, especially when money is tight. But rather than focusing on "losing" that ten percent, especially when we pray as we give, our focus shifts to, "Wow! Look at this remaining 90 percent with which God has blessed us."

Therefore, tithing shifts our priorities in spending. We focus more on what really matters with the rest of that 90 percent, not simply on what we'd "like to have" and our wants.

Tithing shifts our focus entirely. It puts God first in our lives. As we continue to reflect on Matthew 6:33, "Seek **first** God's kingdom and God's righteousness, and then all these other things will fall into place for you." All those other things are what Jesus is talking about in that section in the Sermon on the Mount about worry, when Jesus says the pagans worry about what they're going to eat and wear and drink and so forth. Jesus says don't be like the pagans. Don't be like everybody else. You're meant to be different. Seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness, and these other things will take care of themselves. And then he goes right back to worry: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry, for today has enough troubles of its own. Worry about tomorrow's, tomorrow."

Seek first God's kingdom, and tithing helps us put God first in our lives. The problem, of course, is that we don't *always* put God first, do we? It's a pattern in humanity. It's addressed by prophets like Malachi. The scripture begins by God saying, "I, the Lord, do not change." He's talking about his essence, his nature, who He is. He's saying that God is *always faithful*. We serve a *covenant* God, not a *contract* God, for which we should give thanks. Because a contract God would say to us, "Hey, you didn't hold up your end of the deal, so therefore that exempts me from my end of the deal. Peace out, y'all, I'm done with you."

But, thank goodness, we don't serve a God like that. God in his covenant faithfulness is heartbroken when we don't keep up our end of the deal and put God first as He puts us first so often. God even says, "Ever since the time of your ancestors you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them."

But then God offers an invitation. "Return to me, and I will return to you," God says. And so the people, through the prophet Malachi, ask, "How? How should we return to You?" And God says, "Quit robbing me." And the people go, "What? We're robbing you? How in the world could we rob you, God?" And it's as if God's answer is, "You're *tipping* me. You're not tithing." You see, tipping is based on services rendered. It's based on our perceived comfort and happiness and pleasure. Did we have a good experience for which we are offering the tip? It's based on attitude – our attitude and the person providing the service. Let's face it, tipping is basically about putting ourselves first. How generous are we feeling in that moment?

But tithing – Tithing is based on promise. Tithing is based on faithfulness and is based on trust. Tithing is based on putting *God* first, no matter how we feel at the moment.

Tipping is all about the dollar amount. What's that percentage that we're supposed to give. And even when it comes to tithing, one of the questions that pastors get asked most often about tithing is, "Pastor, does it have to be on gross, or can it be on net?" It's about the dollar amount.

But tithing is not about the dollar amount. Tithing is all about the heart. About reflecting on God's heart for us and how we might respond in kind, such that some feel led to give even more than ten percent.

And, you see, Jesus knew that there's not much of a better barometer of where our hearts lie, of who and what is first in our lives, than where we allocate our money. Whether we make \$40 a week or \$4,000 a week.

One of the things I learned about the Korean Church when I visited over there is that, when you become a member of the Korean Church, the pastor comes to your

house and sits down with you and your family and asks you to pull out your family budget, and they take a look. And if you are not currently tithing to the Church, they work with you, with your family budget, to help you figure out how you can start tithing to the Church. Aren't you glad we don't do that here? I am.

But the thing of it is, if we have a physical problem with our heart, what do we do? We call Tom and Shannon, don't we? We call our doctors. We ask them to get invasive with us, to take a look, to diagnose what's wrong so that we can get better physically, right? Why not spiritually as well?

God issues a challenge to us. It's a rare challenge. God says, "Test me in this." Tithe. Don't just tip God, but tithe. "Test me in this," God says, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it." Friends, that's not prosperity gospel, but simply a promise of God's ever-loving faithfulness when ours fails so often. Because at the heart of it all, it's not about the dollar. It's not about the amount. It's about the opportunity to return to God yet again. To get back on the wagon and to put God first and foremost in *every area of our lives*. Even our finances.

Thanks be to God. Amen.