

“Form 1040”

Psalm 127, Mark 12:38-44

November 17, 2024

Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut

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The message this morning is on tithing, giving 10% of our income to the work of Christ through the church. It follows last week’s message on “Sowing the Future,” which talked about proportional giving as part of being the sowers, the seed-planters, that God calls into fields of service.

The message is inspired by today’s Gospel reading, and in response to an unasked question that may be in the hearts of some: *“Does Pastor Brian practice what he preaches?”* Woodbury’s negative experiences with clergy are known to many, so it is reasonable to wonder *“Why trust this one on a topic so central to our lives?”*

Let’s start—as it is so often good to start—with the Gospel. After riding into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday on the last week of his earthly life as recorded in Mark 11, Jesus has been teaching in the temple. We are now at the end of chapter 12 and the teaching reaches the moral crescendo of Jesus critiquing religious leaders whose deeds do not match their creeds. They are quite corrupt—cheating widows out of their homes—and Jesus has no patience for it: *“they will be judged most harshly,”* he says.

While offering this teaching he sits across from the temple collection box, watching people give their offerings. Rich folk give much, as we humans measure such things. Then comes a widow. In Biblical times, widows were as close to destitute as anything we can imagine. In a patriarchal culture, property ownership resided with men. So a widow, without a man, had little economic security. For a fuller treatment of this, take ten minutes and read the story of Ruth in the Hebrew scriptures. The Bible is filled with promises of God’s care for widows and admonitions to synagogue and church about the care of widows (Psalms 68:5 and 146:9; 2 Kings 4:1-7; Luke 7:11-15; Deuteronomy 14:28-29 and 24:19; I Timothy 5:3 and 9-12; Isaiah 1:17, James 1:27; Exodus 22:7 and 22-24, Malachi 3:5; Jeremiah 7:6; and Mark 7:10-13 and 12:40.)

So this widow comes in, Mark tells us, and gives two copper coins worth about a penny. Not much, as humans measure such things. “Chump

change” we might say. But somehow Jesus knew—as he so often seems to know things unknown to us—that this was all the hard currency this widow had, “*all she had to live on*” as the passage says. In other words, she gave 100%.

I don’t know about you, but I am humbled by the widow’s faith and generosity. As important as I believe giving is, I have never given away everything. Like the rich man in Mark 10 whom Jesus told to “*go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, then come follow me,*” I have gone away from Jesus “*grieving, for [I have] many possessions.*” I am humbled and stunned by Jesus’ example of the widow giving a proportional gift of 100%.

That said, there is some practicality to not giving away everything, of not becoming in need of a life ring instead of throwing a life ring to others. If so, then what is the standard we should consider? The tithe is the Biblical standard for proportional giving. It is giving 10% of one’s income to the work of Christ’s Church. I said these words last week and repeat them today: *It is a benchmark, not a law: a way of measuring this one aspect of stewardship. Like many other aspects of the spiritual life—prayer, Bible study, service to others, presence in worship—some of us go beyond it; some never make it. But it is what the Bible tells us to reach for. I would be negligent in my pastoral leadership if I did not urge you to reach for it.*

Few of us begin our giving history as tithers. Carol and I certainly did not. I continue to run road races—approved by my surgeon—even after my two surgeries last year. In the early 2000’s I ran marathons. But whether 26.2 miles or the annual Thanksgiving “turkey trot,” I don’t wake up one morning and say “*I’m going to run a road race today.*”

Instead, I train. Incremental increases in speed and distance over time allow me to race. It is the same with tithing. For me, as a young man in ministry with a young family, I began with proportional giving: not giving what was left over, but as a proportion of total income. Over a five year period our giving grew in steps, so that by the time I was pastor of my own church at 27 years old, I tithed as I have asked others to tithe. I did not ask others to do what I would not do. And I have continued to tithe ever since.

Sometimes people ask *"Pastor, is this 10% before or after tax?"* I think you can make a case for both. In Bible times there was no social safety net, no social security, no SNAP food assistance program, among many helps that our taxes provide. In Bible times the only safety net was the synagogue and church. So I think it is fair to say that an after-tax tithe meets the Biblical benchmark.

I also think this question can move us into a legalism that misses the point. The statistical reality is that most United Methodists are nowhere near a tithe. We, as a denomination, give about 2% of our income to the church. If Woodbury is typical of that, and we gave ½ a tithe, we would double our income!

On a lighter note, tithing has its benefits. Two people in a small plane crashed on a remote island. The plane was destroyed but they were unhurt. One sat quietly. The other got up, ran around in panic, and wailed, *"There is no shelter, no food, no water on this island. We are doomed."* The other answered, *"I make \$25,000 a week."* Stunned, the distraught person shouted again, *"Did you not understand me? There is no shelter, no food, no water on this island. We are doomed!"* Again the other said, *"I make \$25,000 a week."* Replied the first, *"What is wrong with you? We are marooned here and all you can say is how much you make each week?"* Came the reply: *"I make 25,000 a week. I tithe. My pastor will find us."*

On a personal note: when my eldest son was accepted to college, the college sent a financial aid package. I wrote back to them and said that their package was based on a faulty assumption, that all our income was available in their calculations. I told them that I was a tither and that we truly believed that that portion of our income did not belong to us. Indeed, we never saw it as we gave it to the church. They increased my son's aid!

Some may feel it is uncouth to share my testimony in this way: that these are private matters that should not be spoken of in public, and that to speak of such in public is a form of bragging. I disagree. I invite you to consider working toward the tithe if you are not tithing now. I want you to know that I practice what I preach. I want you to know that it didn't happen overnight, that it took five years of discipline and incremental

increases to get there. I want you to know that this life-long commitment on my part has been matched by life-long faithfulness on God's part.

But how would you know?

Through this offer, which is the inspiration for the title of this message. The old saying is that the only things certain are death and taxes. As people of faith we disagree with that saying, claiming as a certainty God's eternal love and care. In the spirit of Mark 12:17, we render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. In the spirit of both God and Caesar, Carol and I are willing to show our 2023 IRS Form 1040 to anyone who will show us theirs. We are willing to show income and charitable giving, including giving to the congregations of which we are a part, toward the end of showing that our deeds match our creeds with respect to tithing. We offer it not as a challenge, but as an invitation to grow into deeper discipleship in this important area of stewardship, and to hear your wonderful stories of how God has blessed you by blessing others.

I close with this: we do not earn our salvation, by giving or any other means. A person died and went to the pearly gates, there met by St. Peter. St. Peter said, *"Wonderful to see you, but you need 100 points to get in."* The person said, *"Well, I'm a baptized Christian and love the Lord."* St. Peter said, *"That's one point."* The person said, *"You know, I loved my in-laws."* St. Peter said, *"That's one point."* The person is a bit nervous now and said, *"Well, I tithed my whole life."* St. Peter said, *"That's one point."* By now the person is sweating profusely and says *"Look, I taught Junior High Sunday School for years."* St. Peter said, *"That's one point."* Despairing, the person replied, *"At this rate, the only way I'm getting to heaven is by the grace of God."* St. Peter said, *"That's 100 points! Come on in!"*

None of my testimony about tithing is essential to salvation, here or in the life beyond. The Bible makes that clear. Christ has died, once for all, for our salvation (**Hebrews 9:26**). God causes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust (**Matthew 5:45**). We are saved by grace through faith. (**Ephesians 2:8-9**). None of what I've said about tithing is essential for our salvation.

But it ***is*** a measure of our ***response*** to this glad, generous, free gift of salvation from God. To that end, as with our use and management of time,

talent and testimony, our use of “treasure” is a measure of our yearning to grow in grace, grow in ministry, and grow in tangible expression of love to one another and to the neighbors we haven’t yet met.

May we grow this year: in our giving, if it is possible, by the grace and providence of God. Most importantly, may we continue to grow in our love for Christ through this congregation, and for the lives touched and changed by our giving. Amen.