

Centre Congregational Church, U.C.C.  
Sunday, 28 October 2018

Hebrew Scripture: Deuteronomy 14:22-26  
Christian Scripture: Luke 21:1-4

“It’s All about Proportion”

Proportion  
equality of 2 ratios

$$\frac{a}{b} = \frac{c}{d}$$

$$\frac{60}{100} = \frac{3}{5} \quad \frac{1}{2} = \frac{5}{10} \quad \frac{x+5}{20} = \frac{3}{10}$$

A man dies and is met by Peter at the pearly gates. Peter says, ‘You need 100 points to make it into heaven. Tell me all of the good things you’ve done and I’ll give you a certain number of points for each item, depending on how good it was. When you reach one-hundred points, you get in.’ ‘O.K.,’ the man says, ‘I was married to the same woman for fifty years and never cheated on her, not even in my heart.’ ‘That’s wonderful,’ says Peter, ‘that’s worth three points!’ ‘Three points?’ the man exclaims. O.K., well I started a soup kitchen in my city and worked in a shelter for the homeless.’ ‘Fantastic, that’s good for two more points,’ Peter says. ‘Two points!’ the man cried. ‘Well, I attended church all of my life and supported its ministry with my tithe and service.’ ‘Terrific!’ says

Peter, 'that's certainly worth a point.' 'One point? 'At this rate, the only way I'll get into heaven is by the grace of God!'



To which St. Peter replied, 'Come on in!'

I love the St. Peter jokes. I have heard many and told many, and they never seem to get old.

I like this little joke, which I am sure many of you have heard before, because it dispels a common notion that we have of the tithe. The notion the joke dispels is that 'to be faithful, you must tithe'. Yet, my message today is: you don't have to tithe! How is that for a Stewardship Campaign message?! Lisa, Lynn, Anne! Let us change the Stewardship Campaign motto from 'Behold, I Am Doing a New Thing' to 'Ya Don't Have to Tithe!'



There are lots of reasons we don't need to tithe. One, as Christians, we are no longer *bound* by law found in the Hebrew

scriptures, we are rather *freed* by the love emphasized in the Christian scriptures. So, when we give, we give out of love because we want to, not because we have to! Hence, the man in our joke gets very little credit for doing what he thinks he was obligated to do.

The St. Peter jokes points to why it is that the tithe is not a requirement, not a 'have to'. The reason the tithe is not required is because a tithe does not result in God's love of you! It is already there! As the joke connotes, God's grace is already freely given to us. We simply accept it; we don't earn it. God's love for us is not borne from our obligation to the law. Therefore, when and if we give a tithe, we give out of response to God's love. We give because we are thankful. The tithe is simply an expression of appreciation and happiness. In short, 'God loves, so we tithe', not 'we tithe, so God can love us'.

But, I think we can go deeper than this. I will go so far to say: 'God does not always want us to sacrifice that with which he has blessed us'.



Yes, I know, that a shocker of a statement. But I think it's true. I don't believe that God always wants us to forfeit that which God had given us. I know, I know that Anne, Lynn and Lisa are really getting worried now. They are thinking, "Scott is really ruining this entire Stewardship Campaign here by telling members first to not tithe and then to not to forfeit that with which they are blessed." But friends, listen to me, hear me out, journey with me now.

Jesus states in John 10:10, "I have come that [you] may have life, and that you may have life in all its fullness".



And we see glimpses of this ethic in the Hebrew scriptures in regards to 'what God gives us, he wants us to enjoy to its fullness'. God does not necessarily, and certainly not exclusively, want sacrifice!



Abraham understood he was to sacrifice his ‘first fruits’ to God, Isaac. Yet, the dagger was not plunged. Abraham was to enjoy his son that God had given him. God did not want, in this case, a sacrifice.

What about our scripture this morning from Deuteronomy?

Who heard it? It was a shocker! Did you miss it? Who heard it?



Our scripture this morning told how after God blessed the people with prosperity, the people were to take their tithe to town and “there spend it as you will on cattle or sheep, *wine and strong drink*, or whatever you desire; you shall consume it there with rejoicing, both you and your family, in the presence of the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 14:26). What?! Are you kidding me? No way! Did we read that right? ‘Take your tithe, bring it to town, blow it on food and drink, and enjoy yourself in the presence of the

Lord!' What did sort of hermeneutical, exegetical, homiletical gymnastics did the Southern Baptists do with that scripture?

Unbelievable! Take your tithe and celebrate!?



And, is this not the first miracle of Jesus, taking the jugs of water, which the Jews by Law used for purification rights, and instead turned the purification water into wine (John 2:1-10)? Why? Not to purify, but to celebrate, to par-té! God wants us to live life and live it abundantly!

So, let's review what we have learned this morning: Number one, you don't have to tithe. Number two, if you do tithe, you should go to town with your family and blow your tithe on beef, mutton, wine or strong drink or on whatever you desire, in the presence of the Lord. (This surely must be the most bizarre Stewardship Campaign sermon ever!)

Before I leave you with only the above conclusions, we need to know a bit about the tithe.



First, tithe simply means a ‘tenth’. It is a fraction, it is a proportion. It need not be anything sacred or holy. Second, truth be told, there was more than one tithe to be given in the Hebrew scriptures.<sup>1</sup>



There was the Levitical or Sacred Tithe, these tithes went to Levites, the priests. There was the Feast Tithe (what I am speaking of today). And there was the Poor Tithe, tithes to immigrant refugees, orphans and widows. (Notice the commandment was not to make orphans out of the immigrant refugees! Rather a tithe was to go to the immigrant refugees!).

A tithe is not even necessarily ten percent of your income. It isn't. Some scriptures have the tithe as only ten percent of your ‘increase’. So, in today’s parlance, that would only be ten percent of our cost of living increase or ten percent of our profits. There I go again, ruining the Stewardship Campaign, telling you don’t have

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<sup>1</sup> <https://study.com/academy/lesson/tithes-definition-types.html>  
“Tithes: Definitions and Types”, Study.com, chapter 3, lesson 13.

to give ten percent of your income. But, am I telling you that? No, I'm simply telling you that the tithe is not a rule and even the concept of the tithe is diverse in its meaning.

So, there is not one tithe and none of the tithes necessarily needed to 'go to God', per se. Here, in Deuteronomy we read about one particular tithe that was simply one-tenth, not of sacrifice, but precisely the opposite: tithe of gluttonous thanksgiving! The tithe was a celebratory applause to God for the prosperity received.

So, can the tithe also be a sacrifice? Why yes!



In our Christian scripture reading from Luke, we hear of the poor widow who quite possibly gives, not one tithe, but ten tithes (one hundred percent) to the House of God. Now, that is surely sacrificial.

Every once in a while someone asks me what would be the most appropriate gift to give someone they love. My response is, "Give what hurts the most to give". This lesson was taught to me by an old boss of mine, Paul. Paul used to be a high flying professional



Blues musician. Some years ago, he was at the top of his game, a musician's musician, in Chicago. He played behind his back, with his teeth, a musician's musician, in my opinion, a musical genius.



Paul had a collection of guitars, maybe ten. On the night of my departure to Africa, he sat me down on my couch, he told me to close my eyes, and he placed in my lap a golden Heritage Les Paul guitar. I was shocked. Why? I could not play a single cord of that guitar, and he was perfectly aware of it. I asked him, “Why are you giving me this guitar?” He replied, “Because this one thing hurts the most to give you”.

Friends in Christ, do you have to give a tithe? No. Do you have to give your last two pennies? No. Do you have to give your most prized possession to a moron who doesn't know what to do with it? No.

So, what is the tithe? Well, from Deuteronomy we learn that it is money you give to yourself, to celebrate, to enjoy, in the presence of God to celebrate. In other words, the tithe is that

which God wants us to use for ourselves to enjoy life. And we learn from the gospel of John, that the gospel can and should be a painful, sacrificial act of selflessness. But whether a tithe is gluttonous or sacrificial, it is a response to God's love and blessings on our life.

I pray we can be a wise and discerning people. I pray we can hold both these contradictory notions of the tithe together at once - a paradox. When we give, it is up to you to decide what for you your tithe means. But, when you give, may you realize that when you give to our church you are giving to yourself and to your family - it is divinely sanctioned gluttony to give to this beautiful church! There is no meat and no drink that I enjoy more than being with you all.



When I give to this church, I am investing in myself and my family and I am buying my heart's desire - fellowship with you! And may you also realize that the tithe can be sacrificial, for others, for ministries that lie outside the bounds of this church. Like the poor widow, and my friend Paul, may we give what hurts the most to

give. Can we do both? I think so. The mystery and power of God equips us to tithe to ourselves and to tithe to God at the same time. This only makes sense, since God lies within us and we within God - in equal proportion.

This was the word of God, and it was spoken to the people of God, and the people of God responded, "Amen".