

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Sunday, November 24, 2019
Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost

“A ‘Thanksgiving’ Tithe”
Fourth of Four in “Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread”

The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper
Hebrew Scripture: Genesis 28:18-22
Christian Scripture: Luke 18:9-14



Welcome to the *fourth* of four and the final sermon dedicated to our Stewardship Campaign entitled “Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread”!



The last church I served in South Africa was the ‘Bethel Congregational Church’. (We have a Bethel town and church in Vermont too!) So, because I once ministered to a church named after

‘Bethel’, this scripture from Genesis is one with which I am well familiar.



First, it is important to note the ‘Bethel’ means ‘The House of God’. So, ‘Bethel Congregational Church’ is a really great name for a church! Jacob named the location in which he slept ‘Bethel’ due to an intense dream he had that caused him to perceive that the location was some sort of conduit to heaven. In fact, Jacob even saw it as a ‘stairway to heaven’.



(Yes, just like the famous Led Zeppelin song!) Angels were going up and down, most likely, on escalators similar to those in which find in malls and airports. And in this wormhole of space and time, God communicated with Jacob. In this dream of Jacob’s, God basically proclaimed, ‘I’m going to dump an *epic* amount of blessings on you and

your descendants. I'm going to give you your daily bread for a long time'.



When Jacob awoke, he exclaimed, if God is going to 'be with me and watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me "my daily bread" to eat and clothes to wear [...], then the Lord will be my God and this stone that I have set-up as a pillar will be God's house'.



So, arguably, Jacob built the first house of worship, the first church, if you will. Then finally, and most importantly, Jacob pledged, "and of all that you give me, I will give you a tenth". Jacob promised a 'tithe'.

Before we move quickly to the Christian scripture, I want us to notice two things about Jacob's tithe. One, it is pledged *before* he received any blessings. And two, the pledge to tithe was motivated by thanksgiving, thanksgiving for what God provides.



People rightly state that the tithe, a giving a tenth of your income to God, is a first testament law which we as followers of Jesus are no longer subject to obey. This is correct, in my opinion.



So, let's go to the second testament. Our Christian scripture relates to us a parable about the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. The Pharisee is the upstanding religious one who prided himself on obeying God's commandments, among them 'fasting twice a week and giving a tenth of all he receives'. Now, one, notice that the Tax Collector is indeed thankful. But the Pharisee is only thankful for not being a

criminal, an adulterer, nor a traitorous tax collector - he is not thankful for anything he has received. Two, notice that the Pharisee is simply 'ticking the boxes', doing what he is expected to do out of obligation, not out of any serious gratitude or thanksgiving.



So, it is true that we are no longer bound by the Law of the Hebrew scriptures. Yet, recall that Jacob did *not* give a tithe out of obligation, but rather out of thanksgiving. And notice in the second testament, the Pharisee mentioned by Jesus did not give from a spirit of thanksgiving, but rather obligation. So, we have a 'flip-flop'. The tithe in the first testament was originally a free will gift of thanksgiving and it evolved over time, all the way to Jesus' time, an act of obligation.



Friends, we are called to this Sunday and throughout the year to give to the church out of thanksgiving, not obligation. But, if I am honest with you this morning, I am not at a place where I can tell you I completed my pledge card *purely* motivated by a sentiment of thanksgiving. Don't get me wrong. I am very thankful for many things and I want to move to a point of faithfulness where I give for the right reason. But, I don't know, maybe I'm not old enough; maybe I'm not wise enough; maybe, I am not strong enough; maybe I'm not faithful enough.

There is some obligation in my giving; I have my take-home salary and I move the decimal point over one and I pay my tithe. Sure, I love this ministry deeply. Sure, the work of the church is my vocation and I have given my life to it. But, truth be told, my motivation to tithe is driven in part by obligation and thus not completely by genuine

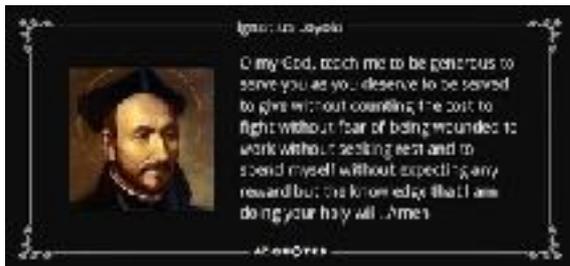
gratitude. And guess, what, that's O.K. Because, I am not perfect, I am no saint. and I am a work in progress, and I am seeking to move in the right direction. I will tell you that I am giving more than I used to, even more than I did when a missionary. Therefore, I am trying very hard to move in the right direction. I probably will never completely make it, but I sure as heck will keep trying to move in the direction of gratitude.



Some of you may not give ten percent of your income, or even five percent, or even two percent to our beloved church. Few of us are saints nor are like the woman who gave her last two pennies, all that she had to live on (Mark 12:41-44). And that's O.K. for now because you can and will move in the right direction with me. From two, to five, to ten percent, to not even knowing what percent, and to giving out of *thanksgiving* rather than obligation.



One question can be: How will we know when we are in the right place spiritually when it comes to giving? One answer to that question can be: When we give without moving a decimal point. That is the litmus test. When I give more than ten percent, *without even doing a calculation*. I'm not there yet. But, I want to be.



Friends, if you are able, give without using a decimal point and promise to teach me how to be where you are. And if you are pledging today with a decimal point and out of obligation, thank you for joining me. Let's move forward together. And if you are giving much less than a tenth. Thank you. For, you very well could be far more faithful than the rest of us because you are giving out of genuine appreciation and not calculating. No matter how much we give, all of us together will build this church so that it is 'Bethel', the House of God.

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God and the people of God responded, “Amen”.