

1 Sermon, October 16, 2011

Texts: Proverbs 11:24-25, Acts 20:32-35, Deuteronomy 14:22-29

Title: "Enough: Defined by Generosity"

Have you ever thought that God loves a party?

Well, what is worship but a celebration? A party with dignity?

This is especially true in the origin of the tithe. We may *think* of a tithe as a sad-faced sacrifice of a tenth of our income to the church. But actually, in its original meaning the tithe was supposed to be the reason for a holy party.

Here's how it was supposed to work, at least in part of ancient Israel: When you had completed your harvest, you would gather a tenth (a tithe) of the grain, and the first-born of your animals, and go to a place that was holy to the Lord. And there, with a whole bunch of other people, you were to have a celebration – a harvest celebration.

There would be a big feast, and nobody was to be left out. You were especially supposed to include widows and orphans and strangers. This was to be a way of providing for those who had no land and little income. In the same way, you were to especially include the priests, who with their organizing of worship for the Lord did not have land, nor did they have time to farm.

There were also special considerations. If you lived too far away to take a tenth of your grain to the harvest celebration, you were to sell it, and then buy some grain or animals or whatever struck your fancy from someone who lived nearer the celebration. You'd use that for the feast.

Then, every third year, you would do something different. You would put a tenth of your grain into storage, and make it available to all those in need. You would make sure to include the poor and lonely and the Levites and priests.

Imagine, if you will, a central storage building in the village, covered with thatch and filled with clay jars. The clay jars would be filled with grain or dried beans or lentils or anything harvested that would keep. The jars would be sealed to prevent rodents from getting in.

It's kind of like an ancient food pantry available to those in need, all paid for by one third of people's harvest every three years.

Now, we no longer live in an agriculture-based economy. We use money instead of grain or land as the primary means of exchange. We are far enough away from an agrarian economy that we have no real sense of the season of harvest. The majority of people have no sense of whether it's been a good year for corn or wheat or soybeans.

2 Sermon, October 16, 2011

So how do we convert this ancient idea of the tithe into something that speaks to us today?

Well, first of all, we need to set aside a certain amount of our income to celebrate — to enjoy the fruit of God's goodness and our labor. Celebrating is something that God wants us to do!

Second, we are to be in tune with the seasons of our lives. It may not be harvest season, but we can celebrate the new year, the patriotic day of April 15 when we support our nation, the beginning of summer with Memorial Day, the end of summer with Labor Day, etc. These are part of every year. We can celebrate them.

We can also consecrate baptism and confirmation as rites of passage in our lives, along with marriage, divorce, retirement, new jobs, and so on. These are part of the seasons of our lives.

Do you see how supportive the faith community can be to people in times of transition and change? We can grieve and rejoice with people in the major events of life, even if we have no idea when the harvest is.

And it's worth celebrating with farmers when they do have a good crop, or great weather for haying, and so on.

You can see that this ancient understanding of a tithe was not a legalistic thing, even though it was put in the form of a religious law in Deuteronomy, one of the books of the Law.

This ancient understanding of the tithe was that it be part of the rhythms of our lives, so that we understand that God is connected to *all* the parts of our lives.

This ancient understanding of the tithe was also about inclusion and community and sharing. It was something done together, by family and clan and nation. It included everyone, those who could afford it, and those who couldn't.

And just like the mission that we do at Columbus United Methodist Church, the ancient tithe was about sharing. About sharing not just money, but part of ourselves, because it really was sharing the result of our own sweat and elbow grease, as well as God's blessing.

3 Sermon, October 16, 2011

In the church, we come as close as anybody does to the celebration and inclusion and community that is the spirit of the original idea of tithing. We share with each other. We believe in each other. We support one another.

How can anyone have an objection to this kind of generosity? It's exactly what we intend to be as a church.

I think I can tell you where the disconnect comes. What I've described to you as celebrating the seasons of life, as caring deeply, sharing authentically and including everyone — that's what I see when I think of church — especially this church.

But a lot of people look at the church and see the building, which they might say is too big, or too impersonal, or too something.

A lot of people look at the church and see an institution bent on maintaining itself, interested in money just to pay the bills and not much more.

A lot of people look at the church as harboring bigots who are anti-homosexual, anti-immigrant, anti-integration, and judgmental about anyone who doesn't believe the exact same thing they do.

A lot of people look at the church and see the abuse that church people have perpetrated on women and children from Jimmy Swaggart to Roman Catholic priests.

A lot of people look at the church and see an organization that has, through the centuries, been complicit with people in power, from big landowners with paramilitary groups in South America to Hitler in Germany to the Crusades of the middle ages.

But that's not what I see.

When I look at the church, I look at it as the place where the spirit of Jesus is most evident in the world.

I see church as the place where people really do love each other, and come together weekly for strength to keep up that love.

I see the church as a training ground for peacemakers, who deeply desire peace in families and among nations.

I see church as the place where the really odd ducks of society finally find acceptance and belonging.

I see the church as the place where good news is spoken, good news that liberates through relationship with Christ and others.

4 Sermon, October 16, 2011

And I really do see it. I see these things all the time in you — in Columbus United Methodist Church.

If the ancient idea of tithing was sharing, celebration, inclusion and community, this is a church that practices it.

We are generous and caring people. At the Pork Chop dinner, someone wanted to buy pork chops for a family that was burned out of their apartment. That's typical of this church.

Our only fundraiser is not for ourselves, it's for others. That's typical of this church.

When there is a need, people respond. That is part of the DNA of this congregation.

I think this congregation is quite a bit above average; but we still have a ways to go. The average United Methodist gives about one percent of income, and I think we're closer to 2½ or three percent.

That ancient tithe was ten percent of the harvest, which is a significant chunk of income. You can't give away one tenth of your harvest and not notice that the pile is significantly smaller.

It is a significant sacrifice, which I think is why it was a tenth. We're meant to notice it when we give. We're meant to give so that we feel it, and really feel for the others we share it with.

I think that's what the reading from Proverbs speaks about:

Some give freely, yet grow all the richer; others withhold what is due, and only suffer want.

A generous person will be enriched, and one who gives water will get water. (Proverbs 11:24-25)

When we give freely, we are blessed. Or as it says in Proverbs 22:9:

Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor. (Proverbs 22:9)

There is in your bulletin a sheet that says "Enough Stewardship Campaign" on the top. Below it says "Personal Goals and Commitment for 2012." It's a tool to help you think about your role as a steward or caretaker of God's creation.

5 Sermon, October 16, 2011

If you look at the sheet, there is room for creativity. You can see that there are a number of areas in which you can take practical action in your faith life. These involve 1 thankfulness, 2 simplicity, 3 debt, 4 savings and 5 giving.

If you think about it, the ancient idea of the tithe fits in well with this sheet. The tithe was meant to be used to prayerfully celebrate with your community. The tithe was of the simplest things: grain and beans and young animals. It was a way to save up for emergencies by storing some grain and beans. It was a way to give and be generous.

I hope that you can write something in at least one of these areas. Perhaps you might be encouraged to start building an emergency savings fund, or to cut up a credit card. Maybe you'd like to start a thankfulness box, into which you can put slips of paper that express the things you are grateful for. Or maybe you'd like to change your giving habits, and plan out a way to balance your giving to the church with other giving.

I pray that this sheet and what I've preached will be helpful to you both in your spiritual life and your practical life. Amen.