

Malachi 3:6-12 ~ Matthew 6:19-24

Bring the Full Tithe

November 10, 2019 ~ Stewardship Commitment Sunday

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction to Gospel Reading:

The words you are about to hear from the 6th chapter of Matthew are a small morsel of the feast that we now call Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount." These words were not intended for everyone. It was not a general crowd, nor was it a group of critics that Jesus was addressing that day. No. This teaching, this sermon, was intended for people who wanted to follow Christ. Folks who were hungry to be taught by this amazing, mysterious man about a new and better way to live. And Jesus gives them a lot to chew on in just these six verses. I'm sure they didn't understand everything he said, but they could feel the power, the truth, the far better way to live, that his words illuminated.

Matthew wrote this gospel down for some of the very first Christians, folks struggling to discover how to be Jesus' followers at about fifty years after he was crucified and raised from the dead. Those early Christ-followers had expected him to return any moment. But the longer they waited, they realized it was time to regroup. Now what? Matthew's gospel was intended to answer that question.

And here we are today about to listen to this same text. Here we are in church on a cold Sunday morning when we could be sleeping in, chilling at home having a slow cup of coffee and visiting our favorite websites, Facebooking, perusing Pinterest, 1-click purchasing on Amazon, or getting ready to watch the Packers to play the Panthers this afternoon. (Wait, you could be doing any of those things right now, on your smart phones in your pew.) Nevertheless, here we are. Why? I think it's because we too, at some level--are hungry for truth. We too are eager to become the people God wants us to be, we too, yearn for our broken world to be healed. If that's why you're here this morning (along with seeing what you won at the auction and enjoying a delicious pancake breakfast with some of the most amazing people on earth)-- then you came to the right place.

Truth is: Jesus opened up a different way to live by challenging and critiquing the systems in play in his day. He showed us a fuller way to live (which does include silent auctions and pancakes, and pledging, btw). If only we actually did what he said. So, let us now give Jesus our full attention as we listen to this reading of God's Holy Word in Matthew 6, beginning at verse 19, from The Message Bible.

Sermon:

Two men crashed their private plane on a South Pacific island. Amazingly, both survived. One of the men brushed himself off and then ran all over the island to see if they had any chance of survival. He came back, distraught. “This island is uninhabited: there is no food, no water, we are going to die! It would have been better if we had just died instantly in the crash.” The other man leaned back against the fuselage of the wrecked plane, folded his arms, and responded. “No, we’re not. It’s stewardship season at our church, and I tithe. I’m sure our Stewardship and Finance Committee will come find us!”ⁱ

This is just a joke. And you may have heard it before. But even though we laugh or groan, and maybe some of us are now wishing we had slept in, because, “Oh, no, here comes the ‘money’ sermon,”—today’s texts tell this truth: our relationship with money is no joke. Why do you think that Jesus talked about money more often than he talked about love, or prayer, or heaven and hell? He knew how tricky and trippy a topic it was.

Jesus cuts right to the core of the problem in v. 24: You can’t worship two gods at once, as it is written in TMB. The NRSV says, “You cannot serve God and wealth. You may have heard this verse with the word “mammon,” as in: “You cannot serve God and mammon.” That was the Aramaic word that Jesus used which has come to mean, “money, material wealth, or the greedy pursuit of material gain. According to Jewish New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine, “mammon” was originally derived from the word “*aman*” which means “where one places trust *other* than God.”ⁱⁱ Isn’t that the bottom line? In whom or what do we really place our trust? When push comes to shove, when we are backed into a corner and when we are presented with unexpected opportunities: where is our heart? Whom or what do we really trust? Will it be door number 1 (God) or door number 2 (money)?

Well, that’s easy: Door number 2--money! Isn’t that what every voice on every screen, on every channel, shouts out to us? We all know the *real* golden rule: it’s not about doing unto others as you would have them do to you. Even though that’s what Jesus (and every other major religion) proclaims as a core commandment. Sounds good: but look around: that’s not really the one we live by. That one goes like this, “The one with the gold, rules.” Consider our current political and judicial systems as evidence. Prophet Jesus, channeling Micah, pushes back and says “no.” It doesn’t have to be that way. In this sanctuary today Jesus is giving us the heart-changing, world-transforming choice we may have forgot about. No matter how far behind you are in your credit card payments or how many years your new car loan extends, no matter if the monthly gap between your income and expenses keeps you up at night, or if college debt of your own or your children’s seems never ending; or the calculus between your longevity and your dwindling assets raises your blood pressure, Here’s the good news: You can choose where your heart is. Right now. Door number one, or door number two?

Jesus said, “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Yes, our money and our hearts are intricately tied into a Gordian Knot. Jesus knew that. And he gives us the way to untie it: We have to start with the right question, “Which God are we serving?” Protestant reformer Martin Luther observed, “There are three conversions necessary: the conversion of the heart, the mind, and the purse. Of these three, it may well be we find the conversion of the purse most difficult.”

“Conversion of the purse” certainly is the most tangible conversion of the three. It’s the one we can see and hold, grab on to for dear life, or let go of and give away. Purse conversion may be our best way to realign our hearts with God, door number one. Maybe that’s why Jesus talked about it so often. Here is some more good news: There are specific habits we can form around our relationship with money to help us or get us on track with Door Number One. First, make it a habit when you are making a money decision: Don’t ask, “Do we have the money?” but rather, “Does God want us to have this? Does God want us to do this? That is a very different question. If we don’t have the money in hand, the “do we have the money” question may stop us from doing things God wants us to do. And just because we have the money is not reason enough to go and do something, or go and buy something. Unless we worship the money god, Door number two.

You heard it in Micah: “Bring the full tithe.” It’s time to stop robbing God and robbing your soul in the process. A “tithe” is a churchy word for 10% of your income. And no, the Bible does not specify whether that is adjusted gross income or not. The biblical tithe has been around since Abraham. If you are saying to yourself, “I could never be a tither,” stay with me and listen to my description of what a “full tithe” looks and feels like. For us, it is not 10% of our livestock and produce. That is a literal reading that locks away the power of Jesus’ call to “Bring the full tithe” today. Here is how a tithe offering can dethrone the power of money over our lives:

- (1) *A tithe offering* comes off the top. The first fruit—which becomes the sacred portion of your earnings, no matter the size. Taking it off the top, will remind you that even though your name is on the check, it is God’s money. It also practical: if we wait to give an offering with what’s left over, there may well be none or next to none. Not a meaningful amount. Nor one that reflects your desire to honor and follow Christ.
- (2) *A tithe offering* is a proportional gift. It is a percentage of your income. The biblical standard was 10%. For some of us, that may be too much. For others of us, that may be too little. I believe Christ gives us the freedom to fix our own percentage. Some of us may have heavy obligations: children in college, medical debts—others may be relatively debt free. The point is to find the percentage that is enough of a sacrifice that it pushes you to trust God and not mammon.
- (3) *A tithe offering* is something we give regularly—not just when we feel like it. We serve a God who makes promises to us and keeps them. God wants us to do the same—even when it’s hard to. That’s why I believe making a pledge *helps you* as much as it helps the mission of the church. Making a pledge (regardless of the amount) is an outward sign of your inward conviction that you are trusting God every week of every year. If your

financial situation changes over the year—for the better or for the worse—God will know that. And we, your church are here to support you through whatever life throws you. Your pledge can be adjusted at any point. A pledge is a concrete way of expressing your trust in God, in the future, and your choice to serve God and not money.

I have observed some amazing *tithe offering* examples right here at FPC. I'm looking at one (well, it's being packed up as I preach this sermon): our annual silent auction. We do this regularly every year. I see in this auction an over and above double offering: offering of time through labors of love and donations of treasures and services and countless hours from the Deacons to organize and run the auction. AND then we go and buy these offerings from one another, all to give to the mission of the church. Another example of a regular annual double give-away is the Christmas cookie plate project: we bring cookies for the youth to decorate and then sell to us each Advent. And Jesus smiles. There they go again!

Back when we built this beautiful building, we chose to include in our plan enough space (I'm guessing about 10%, a tithe of our church building) to house Soup or Socks, the food and clothing pantry, on which the poor in our community depend. Every bequest we receive, we give 10% to outreach missions. One final example of a full tithe is our Peace and Global Witness offering received this fall. This is some amazing news. In 2017 and 2018, we collected a total of \$735 dollars each year. In 2019, this offering jumped to \$2,370!! 100% of which goes to peace and global witness projects here and around the globe. We more than tripled the amount of good FPC is unleashed this year through this offering. This jump also has opened my eyes in wonder and belief about the untapped potential, the treasure within our hearts still to be given back to God for mending and transforming the world.

Our relationship with money is a matter of life and death—not only if you need to be rescued off of a desert island. It is a matter of life and death for each of our souls, the soul of our church, our nation, and of this world that God so loved and still loves. Who are we going to worship: God or money? Thanks to Jesus, we have a choice. May each of us bring our full tithe today and every day. Thanks be to God.

ⁱ *Presbylife*, Laughlines, 11/02

ⁱⁱ *The Jewish Annotated New Testament, New Revised Standard Version*, Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, editors, (Oxford University Press: New York, NY, 2011) p.14 footnote.