

"Tithes and Offerings"

A meditation based on 1 Kings 8: 1, 6, 10-11, 22-30, 41-43; Psalm 84; and John 6:56-69

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Redlands United Church of Christ

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Did you hear the one about the minister who returned from an entire month off from work, and on the first day back in the pulpit, started hammering away about money????!!! No really...did you hear the one about...?!

Hammering is a word that springs to my mind when it comes to talk about money and church, for as a child, I remember well those regularly-scheduled sermons about church finances. Perhaps you do, too! It always seemed unusual, if not ironic, that it was the very person who stood to gain the most, financially speaking, who was both praying over the money each week and, at other well-placed times of the year, was also the one urging the congregation to dig deeper and to give more.

Yet, irony aside, it was also at church where I learned the biblical teaching of the tithe—giving one-tenth of one's income off the top to the church to support the work of God. During my growing up years, I heard story after story of persons who gave first to God that seemingly-magical 10% tithe, and equally as magically, always claimed to have plenty left to pay bills and take care of their other responsibilities. These stories impressed me so deeply that, for most of my adult life, our family's charitable giving has been calculated with that simple 10% formula. And, like those stories I heard as a child, there always seems to be enough left.

Some religions require the tithe, and their leaders check the tax returns of members to insure the full 10% is given to the church. We are not so stern in the United Church of Christ.

Here in the UCC, we make, as Garrison Keillor humorously notes, some “pretty good suggestions” about tithing: give as you are able without stressing either your spirit or your bank balances. Yet, as I read today’s passages, I wondered if this sort of stewardship-lite reflects faithfulness to the teachings of scripture. Certainly, scripture speaks often and well about the role of money in the kingdom of God. Put simply, “those who have are required to give to those who have not.” This expectation of wealth being used collectively to assist the whole community is termed distributive wealth by current theologians. The notion of distributive wealth finds its way into Jewish religious laws over and over again. When it comes to money, the Christian scriptures tend to be more vague and even poetic. Wealthy landowners are chided in parables by Jesus for their greediness. Jesus speaks one of his most memorable one-liners relative to distributive wealth, when he quips, “It will be easier for a camel to walk through the eye of a needle, than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” Yet it was none other than Christian process theologian John Cobb, who when presenting a lecture on biblical economics at the Claremont School of Theology several years ago, wittily noted, “If you want to know about the stewardship of money, don’t turn to Jesus...he knew nothing about it!”

So where do we turn for help in learning about tithes and offerings? Surprisingly, I learned something new about tithes, something that has stayed with me for over a year now, when John and I were blessed by you and given a sabbatical visit to Newgrange in Ireland last summer. Newgrange is a temple near Dublin, built to align with the sunrise on the winter solstice. It is 5,260 years old—give or take a decade—and seems to have been used to display the bodies of the ancestors at the time of their death. Newgrange was found in ruins in the middle part of the last century and its breathtaking entrance was painstakingly rebuilt, stone by precious stone. From the entrance, one traverses a narrow stone hallway that makes a slight turn just before opening up into a 2-3 story high inner chamber. At the precise moment of

winter solstice sunrise, the beam of light from the sun travels down that interior hallway and for about 20 minutes, illuminates the inner chamber. A flashlight replica offered an example of this ancient architectural accomplishment, and even that took my breath away! Imagine the hope that would have been awakened in the spirits of our siblings in faith, when, just as winter seemed at its most fierce, the wheel of life quietly turned again, and the special mid-year sunrise brought the promise of light followed by more light. Crops would grow again, animals would be fed, and the days would lengthen, all beginning with that shaft of light illuminating the chamber where the beloved ancestors were displayed.

As impressive to me as was Newgrange itself, so also was a simple exhibit in the visitor's center. In a section designed to educate about the living conditions of the inhabitants around Newgrange, there was an information board that was titled, "Tithe." That caught my ministerial eye! Ah, I wondered, did the ancients also hear hammering about money?! Were they required by their religion to give a percentage off the top to support the building of their temple? But as these questions raced humorously through my mind, I noted that directly underneath the word "tithe" was the translation of it from ancient Irish into English. Tithe translates into the word "houses." Well, that blew that theory of ancient stewardship! Or did it? The more I pondered the serendipitous exchange of the Irish word "tithe" for the English word "houses," the greater the insight grew regarding church finances.

Turn with me, if you will, to the story we read this morning from the book of 1st Kings. It is a lovely story, a magnificent story, purportedly recording the dramatic dedication of the Jerusalem Temple during the reign of King Solomon. Trouble is, the story was written, from memory, several hundred years after it actually happened, written during the most despairing season of Hebrew history, right in the middle of the Babylonian exile. When this passage was

written, the magnificent Temple was in ruins. The city of Jerusalem and its culture was decimated by the invaders; their leaders carted off into exile.

No eye-witness reporting here of the Temple's glorious dedication. Rather what we have is a backwards-looking hopeful account, pulling out of the shared history of a people a memorable chapter in which God was on their side and all was right with their world. To use the language of Newgrange, what we see in the story from 1st Kings, is the little shaft of light, beaming its way through the shadows of exile, illuminating the chamber of the dead, and bringing to life once again, a story of greatness, a story of the ancestors, who, through shadows and storms, managed with God to prevail. A backwards-looking hopeful account...intentionally written to offer the promise of light and more light for the journey ahead...

The psalmist echoes a similar theme. Houses where God resides, he or she notes, are as varied as bird nests and highways, as springs and pools, as tents and temples. There is no place where God is not, proclaims the psalmist, and every place is made holy by the presence of the Divine; every place is a doorway into God's presence, a sacred call to service and love.

I recall a story that happened close to home, right here in this sanctuary, in fact. When this temple was being built back in the year 2000, and the concrete slab had just been poured and set in place, one of our youth—very spiritual himself—came and laid down on that slab. He extended his arms, as if he was going to make snow angels on the dried concrete. But he did not move. He lay still, he told me later, for many minutes. Then, he abruptly rose, and said to himself, "The Spirit is in this place..." That was good news! And this sanctuary, with its walls and windows, its simple and elegant beauty nestled in the garden of God's creation, continues to be a place that people enter and quietly affirm, "The Spirit is in this place..."

This is our spiritual home, or one of them, to be more accurate. In the language of the ancient Irish, our tithe is here. The language of modern church budgets would agree! Our tithe—our one-tenth off the top—is here as well.

We learned last year during our shared sabbatical that Celtic spirituality speaks of “thin places” where God is uniquely present to inspire and protect. These thin places – cairns, stone circles, and other holy spots – such Iona, Glastonbury, and Stonehenge, are often experienced as vortices of divine energy and transformation. Today, some persons locate similar vortices of holy energy in places such as Sedona, Arizona and Taos, New Mexico.

Surely, in ancient times, the Jerusalem Temple was perceived to carry the power of divine revelation and to locate in a particular way God’s presence in the world: a tithe or house for God, if you will. So also is this Temple a tithe or home for God in our day. Yet, even as tithes of the Divine, no Temple can contain or restrain God or God’s work. Solomon noted generations ago during the dedication ceremony of the Jerusalem Temple, “Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built.” God is always more than we can imagine or describe. God will always find a way to break out of any Temple we might construct and to lead us through that doorway as well. Like Aslan, from *The Chronicles of Narnia*, God is untamed and unchained; God can be revealed anywhere and everywhere.

In the gospel reading, Jesus blows the theme of tithe as God’s house right out of the proverbial water! Instead of speaking about physical homes with walls and roofs and concrete floors upon which Spirit may be felt, Jesus proclaims that he, and by extension, we, are to be home, one to another. And Jesus utilizes, I believe, some very obscure and difficult language to communicate this. In almost cannibalistic terminology, Jesus speaks of eating his flesh and drinking his blood...not something we want our children to hear! Yet, in his culture, what he

means to communicate is not a literal ingesting, but a partaking and sharing in his life, his work, his values, his very being.

Jesus here uses a very specific language of sacrifice. You see, in the ancient world, when a sacrifice was eaten, it was believed that the people sharing in the sacred meal were also made sacred themselves. In other words, to eat sacrificed or blessed food was to ingest God's Spirit. There was no sense of cannibalism as we might know it today. Rather, there was a sense of a full-bodied experience of the Divine—an experience in which, as the psalmist writes elsewhere, the people were invited to “taste and see that God is good...”

So Jesus teaches here in the gospel of John that abiding in him is a full-bodied experience. It involves all our senses and requires our full commitment. Here we cycle back around to the tithe as a home, a house, in which Spirit is experienced. And the house, the tithe, to which we cycle, is Jesus himself. “The words I speak to you,” urges Jesus in this passage, “are spirit and life...” Then Jesus asks his first disciples, even as he questions us, “Is this full-body, complete commitment, offensive to you?” “Do you wish, like the others, to shrink back, to recoil from my presence?” In one of the few instances in which Peter gets it right, this fisherman-turned-disciple, exclaims in exasperation, “To whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.”

As with the context for the Temple dedication ceremony in the book of 1st Kings, so also the context for these words in John is one of despair, confusion, loss of direction, and plain old fear. It is the end of the first century after Jesus lived; his followers are scattered to the four winds; there is no Christian theology as we know it today; no universal church; no religious texts other than a smattering of letters circulating amongst the small congregations bordering the Mediterranean Sea. Believers are in exile in their own homes, fearful of the Roman Empire, uncertain if what their grandparents claimed as truth was really still true for them. The author

of John's gospel writes to assure them, pulling story after story from their brief 100-year old history. In this exchange between Jesus and the original disciples, we see that same shaft of illuminating sunrise light, beaming its way down a darkened stone hallway. Here in John, there are no Temples made with human hands. There is only Jesus, a Temple made of Spirit and of Flesh, who offers to us, as he has to others for the past 2,000 years, offers his ministry, his values, his very being for us to savor...for us to taste and to see that God is good, God is very good...

Our tithe, friends, is about money. And it is also about a commitment of time and talents, of leadership and participation, of prayer and singing and talking and listening with delight. Our tithe is about working for justice and walking in love and acting with compassion. Our tithe is about dreaming and doing. Our tithe—our spiritual home—is about responsibly taking care of all we've been given in this Spirit-filled place...including this sanctuary, the gardens, the staff, the increasing programs of worship and of service, the dreams of additional building space, and all the rest. Our tithe means that we each take in the life and ministry and courage and joy of Jesus...chewing on it...savoring it...relishing it...and swallowing what will nourish us all. Giving our tithe means that we become those Temples, as stone by stone we are built into those "thin places" that, for others, are doorways to the Divine.

So, did you hear the one about the minister who returned from a whole month off, and started hammering about money? I hope in Christ that you heard more than that!

Amen and Blessed Be!