

WHY TITHE?
Genesis 14:17-20

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on the Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time, November 4, 2018, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. This is the fifth of five sermons this Fall focused on “Why” questions related to the church: “Why Church?”; “Why Westminster?”; “Why Join?” “Why Give?” “Why Tithe?”

After [Abram’s] return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet [Abram] at the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King’s Valley). And King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High. He blessed [Abram] and said,

*‘Blessed be Abram by God Most High,
maker of heaven and earth;
and blessed be God Most High,
who has delivered your enemies into your hand!’*

And Abram gave him one-tenth of everything.

I.

I have enjoyed developing the series of sermons this Fall on “Why” questions, and I hope you have found them helpful. In the thirty-eight years I have been preaching – fourteen in your midst – it has seemed important this year to return to fundamental questions of our life together:

- Why Church?
- Why Westminster?
- Why Join?
- Why Give?
- Why Tithe?

In addressing the first question, I said that the “why” of *church* is *community*, but not simply the community we find among others of similar interest or disposition, but the community in which our worship, service, learning and relationships lead us to *develop* or *grow* in our Christian faith. The “why” of church is *community* which draws us *closer to God*.

To the second question, I said that the particular “why” *Westminster* offers within the greater “holy Catholic church” is *traditional Protestant worship* centered around *thoughtful preaching* and *several genres of sacred music* drawn from across the centuries, as well as an intentional *welcome* we extend to people *at different stages of faith* and to people of a *variety of political and social viewpoints* found in our nation at this point in our history.

In addressing the third question, I said that the reasons we *join* a church are *change*, *community*, and *challenge*. When we join a *particular* congregation:

- We recognize an inner *change* through which we are going, that is often symbolized in the Bible by putting on a new set of clothes or stepping into a new uniform;
- We join others in a *community* who are making a similar change;

- And we are *challenged* in our change by those in the congregation we admire and those for whom our first impression is not one of admiration. We join a church because of *change, community, and challenge*.

In last Sunday's sermon, addressing the fourth question "Why Give?" I said that *giving* to the church is giving to the most *sacred* entity we know – for all other entities in our lives, even those of home, family, work, friendship, neighborhood – can come and go; and I said that when we give to the church, our faith increases, for our heart follows those places where we place our treasure.

**

These questions about our relationships *to* and *within* the congregation came home to me in two emails I received following last week's service. One read:

Dear Larry,

Following the tragic events in Pittsburgh on Saturday I came to church the next day with a heavy heart. I needed the comfort of familiar ritual and prayers. I received much more. I want to thank Ben for the beautiful violin solo, Whitney for the uplifting prayer and you for an inspiring sermon about commitment. I was reminded anew of the power of worship. With the strains of "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" echoing in my head I journeyed home with renewed hope and faith. I am grateful for the many gifts that Westminster has given me over the years I don't say "thank you" often enough.

Another email read:

Dear Larry,

I was disappointed not to hear a stronger message from the pulpit today about the hateful and violent events of the past week. I was wondering if you would share with me some of the thinking that led to your decision to keep with the theme of stewardship.

I noted the revisions in your sermon to include references to the bombs and the shooting, and I appreciated Whitney's pastoral prayer. And I must confess that...the synagogue shooting [has been] particularly upsetting for me.

I worry that we as a country are becoming inured to mass violence and hateful acts against those we consider different from ourselves. That shakes my faith in both the ideals on which our nation was founded and in the mighty fortress which is our god. ...

The bloodshed in the Tree of Life synagogue is a sign that hatred of The Other is poisoning our public life.

Both these emails bear witness to the *responsible* and *respectful* diversity in this congregation. Both led to deeper conversations with their senders. Both reflect a common sorrow about our nation and a common hope that God will indeed remain "A Mighty Fortress" for us all. These emails are an expression of what we can learn from *one another* when in a time of change and challenge we engage more deeply in this community known as Westminster Presbyterian Church.

II.

I conclude the series today by seeking to answer perhaps the most ambitious question of all – “Why Tithe?”

Sometimes in the common parlance of the church we use the phrase “tithes and offerings” as if they are one and the same. To return to the game we played in logic classes in college, a tithe is an offering, but not all offerings are tithes.

- In the vocabulary of the church, which we inherit from the Old Testament, a tithe, which appears over 36 times in the Bible, is an offering that represents ten percent of what we have.
- Rooted in agricultural days when offerings normally consisted of grain or fruit or livestock, a tithe is – as is said in today’s Scripture reading – “ten per cent of everything.” This phrase is used to describe a tithe at several places in scripture.
- Translated to our day, a tithe refers to the giving of ten per cent of our income to the church.

The surest and simplest way to calculate a tithe is to say it is ten per cent of the total income we receive, before taxes, as well as before contributions we make to causes educational, artistic, scientific, philanthropic. This is an exceedingly high standard, but in the long run it is clearer if we just say a tithe is “ten per cent of everything.”

**

In my first sermon at Westminster fourteen years ago, as in the letter members received this week accompanying our stewardship brochure and pledge card, I shared that I was in my mid forties before I reached the level of tithing. Some of you have shared with me that you began tithing in your twenties when you made your first pledge to the church – alone or with a spouse. Others have shared that you came to tithing later in life, growing steadily each year; and for some, tithing came all at once, when you heard a sermon and decided to respond in full. I sense that many of you are seeking – seriously – to get to tithing over time; and I am sure for others, it seems like a mountain in the distance, covered with clouds, much too far away to hike toward, much too tall to attempt to climb.

But in the remaining minutes of the sermon, I want to ask all of us to *set* or *renew* tithing as a goal for our lives; and I want to offer what it is like to reach that goal and what we can do afterward. As always, I appreciate your listening and your consideration.

III.

Why do I ask you set tithing as serious a goal for your life?

(a)

First, I ask this of you because I believe that our faith is neither as rich nor complete until we are committed to returning to God a significant portion of the material goods which so mark and bless our lives.

Martin Luther wrote:

There are three conversions necessary: the conversion of the heart, [the conversion of] the mind and the [conversion of the] purse.

Without the “conversion” of the purse, it is far too easy for the conversion of the heart and mind to float up here in heaven, spiritual to be sure, but prone to being abstract and removed from the world in which we live. When we devote a significant portion of our resources as an offering to God, we better remember God’s role in enabling us to have these resources in the first place; and we better remember the responsibility God has given us to care for the world in which God has placed us with these resources.

- When I devote a significant portion of my resources to the God who enables me to have them, I find I care more about the widow and the orphan; the least, the last, and the lost; the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned.
- When I devote a significant portion of my income to God, I think not twice about placing a few dollars in a cup a veteran in a wheelchair holds up outside Nats stadium, or writing a check to a teenager whose ring of my doorbell awakens me from an afternoon nap and who is trying to raise money to fund a school trip.

All of this is part of the conversion of the purse that must needs accompany the conversion of the head and the heart. It is aligning ourselves with the Jewish phrase – *tikun olam* – the healing of the world.

(b)

Second, once we reach the goal of tithing, over whatever number of steps or years it takes, we find that we will never look back.

When Maggie and I married twelve years ago, we were both tithers, and we have found since that we have still increased our pledge every year, in response to what our churches were doing. Thus, we now give over \$32,000 annually combined to our two churches. When I calculated it this summer, it turned out to be over 13% of our combined pre-tax income. Nothing says we have to stop with a tithe, and the truth is, once we are there, we don’t really want to stop. It has simply become natural part of our faith.

(c)

Third, the spirit that leads us as Christians to tithe can lead us as well to leave a portion of our estate to the church. A final act of giving involves not only passing on what we have to those we love, to the institutions who have helped shape us, to the organizations which feed and clothe and shelter people; but our final gift can also come in the form of passing on our full estate, half our estate, a tithe of our estate in the same spirit of giving that leads us to set a goal of tithing during our lifetime. It is all part of the conversion of the purse, the hardest conversion, yet an attainable conversion.

A first grade teacher in a school most of whose students were on free and reduced lunches once shared with me how quickly parents of her students gave when one of their number developed a serious illness. Likewise, on the trip I made on behalf of Westminster to Kenya, I experienced how important it is for those we support there to give us gifts, most of which we cannot fit into our already stuffed suitcases. Giving among third world people is an act of sheer joy. It can be for us as well. And often it is beyond “ten percent of everything.”

IV.

I want to close with a scripture which captures this joy. It is a passage that is from the Apocrypha in our Bible, which means it comes from our Bible but not from our official canon. It is found in the book of Ecclesiasticus, also known as The Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach. It captures the sheer joy of giving, the joy of tithing:

*Do not appear before the Lord empty-handed,
for all that you offer is in fulfilment of the commandment.*

*The offering of the [faithful] enriches the altar,
and its pleasing odour rises before the Most High.*

*The sacrifice of the [faithful] is acceptable,
and it will never be forgotten.*

*Be generous when you worship the Lord,
and do not stint the first fruits of your hands.*

*With every gift show a cheerful face,
and dedicate your **tithe** with gladness.*

*Give to the Most High as [God] has given to you,
and as generously as you can afford.*

*For the Lord is the one who repays,
and he will repay you sevenfold.¹*

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

¹ Ecclesiasticus, or The Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach 35:6-13.