

"Where is your Heart"

Matthew 19 - 21

Leviticus 27

Pilgrim Congregational Church
November 13, 1983

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Earlier this fall, I was visiting one of the church school classes, and I asked the children if they had any questions about what I do as a minister or about the church in general. One boy raised his hand and said he had one question about our worship service; "How come is it," he said, "that when we collect the money in the church and then pray over it, we never call it money? You never come right out and say, 'thank you God for the dollars;' you always use some other word." It was a good question, and I was somewhat taken aback by it. As far as I know, there is no rule anywhere that precludes the use of words such as "money" or "dollars" or "cash" in worship. And yet, I have never heard those words used. As I think of all the different church services I have attended of all different denominations, I am coming to the conclusion that the one uniting bond of the church universal is not the proclamation of Jesus Christ as Lord, but a marked reluctance to use the word "money" when what we are talking about is money. The TV preachers speak of "love gifts," others talk of offerings, or gifts, or treasure, or tithes. Especially in this tradition, we are reluctant to speak about money. When we do, it is as vaguely and euphemistically as possible.

The reverend Bob Bergfalk, one of our Minnesota Conference ministers who has been working with this church as a stewardship consultant this year, began his work with the Board of trustees and the Stewardship committee and the callers group saying "What is the standard of giving in Pilgrim church?" "If a new member came up to you and asked what this church expects as a pledge, what would you say?" No one to whom Bob asked that question had an answer. We don't talk much about giving in this church, not even our rationale for giving, or the theological underpinnings of giving to the church, or how we should determine how much we give. We regard these as personal decisions. By just as in other personal decisions, it is sometimes helpful to have guidelines, some input as to reasonable expectations, some standards which we can accept or reject, but which we can at least relate to. So this morning, I would like to take a few minutes to talk about the theology of giving in the Christian church: Why we should give to the church--How much we should give--How we can interpret our level of gift.

The Book of Leviticus is very clear about giving. Reading from the 27th chapter: "All the tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the trees is the Lord's; it is holy to the Lord. And all the tithe of herds and flocks, every tenth animal of all that pass under the herdsman's staff, shall be holy to the Lord." In a time before money was the common mode of exchange, when wealth was counted in flocks and land, the meaning of the passage is hard to dispute. Ten percent off the top was the standard. It is important to note here that what is said in the reading is not that the people

should give one tenth of everything to God, but that in fact, one tenth of everything was already God's. There is no room for choice in this mandate, no option of personal decision making or individual circumstance. That may seem a bit much to us from our perspective, but to the Israelites of that day, it was nothing less than the gift of liberation.

For, you see, the people of Israel in these days were very closely connected to a reality we sometimes forget. To them it was clear the land on which they dwelt was their God's, and that their tenure and their livelihood, whatever the extent or form of their personal assets--their wealth was only theirs at all because God had graciously allowed them to be tenants on this earth. God had brought them out of slavery in Egypt, stood with them in their desert wanderings. It was clear to the people that God was much like a feudal landlord, giving them peace and prosperity in return for obedience and tribute. Most landlords, the strong men of that era by whatever title they called themselves, expected of their subjects, their tenants, a tribute of up to 50 or 70% of what was produced. But in Israel, life was different. The God Yahweh was the landlord and all the Yahweh required in tribute was amere 10%. Enough to be significant, enough to remind you that Yahweh was there and had some expectations in return for letting you dwell in the land, but not the crippling burden of taxation and tribute under which so many other ancient people labored.

"The earth is Yahweh's, and all that dwell therein," cries the psalmist in joy. And we still, in worship and prayer, say these words or give our assent to them. We say we believe that the earth is God's; we say we believe that all the gifts which we receive, the opportunities we are given, our very lives are if not directly, then at least indirectly from God. We say these things but we have lost contact with them in their immediate sense. Our assent to these words has become for us, not an immediate understanding of reality, but in fact, a statement of faith. That statement of faith though is the major theological rationale for giving in the church. We are called to give money to the church, not primarily because the church needs money to support programs, not because we want money for missions and outreach, for building buildings, or feeding the poor, or providing beautiful music, or paying salaries. The primary reason that we are called to give money to the church is to remind us of who we are in relationship to God, to concretely express that our faith begins with the assertion of Genesis: that God created this earth and God created us, and therefore all that we have and all that we are are, in fact, God's, and we are but giving back a part of what we have received. We do this, not because God needs it, but because we affirm that that is the basis of relationship between us.

This theological rationale for giving has been somewhat obscured as the life of God's people has moved from a day of stone altars and priests in tents, to churches with full blown programs of worship and education and outreach and pastoral care. The fact that the church needs money to provide for programs and outreach has pulled us a bit off center; we tend to view our giving in relation to the church's need as opposed

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to in relation to our response to God's gifts in our lives. Our pledge cards say it right; but we don't often read the small print on the pledge cards. Our pledge cards say here in Pilgrim Church, "Out of Gratitude for God's gifts to me, I make this declaration of intention for support of Pilgrim Church." Nothing is said about "Because the church needs it," or "Because I ought to". The reason we are called to give to the church is first and foremost to express the depth of our relationship to God, how far we go in our faith in believing that the earth is God's and we are God's, and we are therefore thankful to God for the gifts which we have been so abundantly given.

There are those who say that they can believe all that and still not give to the church. Some say they support the church with time rather than money, that they give to more important institutions than the church; that they are angry with the minister, or the moderator, or their child's second grade teacher or the person who sits in the pew behind them; and therefore, because of these and other reasons, they don't give to the church. Those people I would refer to Jesus's words in the gospel of Matthew, "Where your treasure is, there you will find your heart also." Where we put our money is a reflection of our priorities, especially those of us who live on comfortable incomes, far above the demands of subsistence. How we choose to spend our money reflects what is most important to us. And sometimes we don't think about it much, until someone draws it to our attention.

I remember when I was in seminary, I very carefully worked out what I thought I could afford to give to the church. I actually felt pretty generous when I was done. And then in a workshop on Christian decision making, all the students in the class were asked to go back over the past twelve months and figure out where their income had gone. I sat down with my checkbook, and when I was done, I was appalled. If someone had asked me, I would have said that giving was a high priority in my life. According to my checkbook, I had an easier time saying "no" to giving and to my sense of thankfulness to God than I did saying no to a sale at my favorite dress shop, buying clothes which I really didn't need but which I wanted. If someone asked me which was more important in my life, clothes or God, I would say God. So why was it so much easier to say "no" to the church than to Saks Fifth Avenue. Why is it still harder to give money away than to buy a new skirt or another pair of shoes.

"Where your treasure is," said Jesus, "there will your heart be also." "The earth is Yahweh's, and all that dwell therein." I give you this little tale of confession, not because I think you are interested in my particular weaknesses, but because after three years of theological education, an equal number of years of parish ministry, and a real sense of commitment to God in my life, I still have trouble setting my level of giving where I believe it ought to be. The United Church of Christ today suggests a modern tithe of 5% of income to the church and 5% in the community. The reason for this split tithe is to affirm the presence of God in the community at large as well as in the church, and still to give 10% on the principle that all that gift is

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given in acknowledgement of the basis of relationship between us and God; that God gave us life and breath and the earth to dwell on, and we are in response thankful for the many gifts we have received. The words are easy to say; the commitment and the faith to put our money behind where we put our words is harder to come by.

This afternoon and throughout this coming week, callers from the church will be carrying out an every-member canvass. They will be bringing you a great deal of information about the church's program and the church's financial needs. They will be asking you to tie your pledge to a proportion of your income, two percent or more on our way up to the goal of 5%. I would ask you this morning to read all the information they give you, but most especially to read the small print at the top of the pledge card, the part which says "Out of gratitude for God's gifts to me, I make this declaration." I would ask you to ask yourself the question of how deeply you really believe "the earth is God's and all that dwells therein." How far are you thankful to God--not just generally thankful--but thankful to God for the gifts of your life. In the words of Jesus, "Where is your Heart?" The questions are not easy ones, and the commitment to back up your answers with your dollars is even harder. Yet it is from the answers to these questions that our giving should stem; it is from the following through on priorities of our hearts and our faith that we grow individually and as a community.

How thankful are you to God? Where is your heart? Think about these questions first above all as you make your pledge to the church this year.