

The Risk of Tithing Matt. 22:15-22

Anyone here have experience
with a family reunion?

The matching t-shirts, shorts, the name tags
the picnics and covered dishes...
here's a gem I dug up:



We were in south Texas for my grandmother,
my dad's mother's,
Stanley Family reunion;
in Freeport TX, about 45 miles south of Galveston.
This probably 1989/90.
It's possible that best thing in this picture
is my mom's sunglasses.

A family reunion is a glorious storm, isn't?
Food and politics and religion
all folded into one weekend
or if you're driving from South Carolina
to south Texas all folded into two weeks.

You're sure to see nieces and nephews,
aunts, and great uncles
and by God cousins so far removed,
you're not too sure if you're related to them
or if they are *family reunion crashing*
because they aren't wearing a matching shirt,
but they must have smelled fried chicken
and emotional overload.
a mile away.

smelled fried chicken
and emotional overload.

Well, the church is having
a big ole family reunion this year.

It is a reunion that gets you back
to your roots.
Like that year we were in Texas
and we drove around looking
at forgotten familial landmarks,
the house where my grandmother and her 5 sisters grew up;
the parking lot of the HEB grocery store
where her grade school used to be.

This kind of reunion
will take you back beyond
the old church house
with creaky floor boards,
back beyond the cemetery
with plastic flowers at gravestones;
just take a moment to stop
to look at those names and dates.

It is a back to your roots kind of reunion,
back to your roots kind of anniversary year
for anyone who claims Martin Luther
as part of their religious, family tree.
And of course that includes us,
Presbyterian, Reformed, Protestant Christians.

The Reformation is fascinating.
Did you know the whole thing started
with a building project?
That's right, their campaign theme was



Indulge: our call to connect, serve and grow.

I'm kidding.
But the part of about the building project
is 100% true.
Back in 1517 the Pope
started a building campaign
to renovate St. Patrick's Basilica.
I know you'll remember that a few weeks ago
we talked about a man named Johan Tetzel
—he was on fundraising committee

and headed to Germany
to raise money for St. Patrick's.

You know, when we start a building project
we sell the rights to name things,
foyers, a new window, playgrounds.
But of course, in 1517 the church
was selling forgiveness
as a way to pay for the renovation.

They called it indulgences;
you would buy these little pieces of paper
that would let you off the hook with your priest.
It was a popular fundraising tool.
And since it had already been done,
we decided to forego that campaign strategy this time around.

The prince of Saxony, Prince Frederick,
wouldn't let Tetzel sell the little pieces of paper
in his territory.
The prince was interesting fellow
—as a lifelong Catholic he spent his adulthood
gathering thousand of holy relics
to fill his castle.

It is said that he had the thumb of St. Anne,
a twig from Moses burning bush,
hay from the holy manger and
—get this—milk from the Virgin Mary.
The thumb and milk
are almost too much for me.
But Prince Frederick no trunk,
no cache of indulgences.

Which meant anyone in his domain
had to travel to get their indulgences
and bring them back.
They'd wave those little pieces of paper
at their priests,
one of which was Martin Luther.
With that little piece of paper,
for that little pledge
to the building campaign,
they no longer
had to repent for their sins.
They were perpetually pardoned.

This was the straw

that broke the holy manger for Luther.
He was so angry
he sat down and wrote out
95 bullet points calling for a reform
of the current practice and theology
of the Roman Catholic Church.

So with the wind at his back
and the backing of Prince Frederick
he marched up to the castle church of Wittenburg
and nailed his 95 points of reform
to the door on October 31, 1517.

500 years ago,
almost to the day.
The rest they say is history.



What is wonderful about Luther though,
is not that he was a just hopeful reformer
or just a disgruntled priest
or even a good protestor.
There were plenty of hopeful reformers
and disgruntled priests and protestors.
What made Luther one among many
was what he stood for,
not what he stood against.
Luther cast whole new theological vision,
one that was based on
God's grace and freedom.

It can be hard now
to even imagine a church
without Luther's emphasis
on God's grace and freedom.
A freedom whose foundation comes from Christ
and tells us that we are loved
just as we are, no strings attached.
No partiality shown,

no forgiveness papers needed.¹

So it turns out
you can't talk about the reformation
without mentioning the building project.
And apparently back then,
a building project needed money.
So guess what, 500 years later,
you can't talk about
our building project
without talking about money.

We've spent this month talking about
The Gospel of Stewardship
and just like promised,
this week is on money!



I love that on the day
we celebrate the Reformation
I get to remind you about your little pieces of paper,
your pledge cards toward
our budget and building project
—things don't seem to change much
over the years, do they?

When we talk about money in church,
and inevitably we will;
and when we talk about stewardship,
and inevitably we will,
your mind will end up
thinking about what pledge is all about;
your money, your tithe.

In our passage this morning,
Jesus is cornered by the religious leaders
who are in fact trying to trap him,
but can't seem to figure out how
given that he isn't really breaking their laws.

¹ Much of the introduction comes from Rev. Dr. Patrick Johnson, senior pastor at First Presbyterian Asheville, NC from a sermon preached at the October 24th 2017 presbytery meeting

So they end up asking him about money.
They got their posse together and said,
*let's get this Jesus character
where it really hurts,
right in the coin purse.*

I have to admire these religious guys
who were not scared
to talk to people about money.
Of course they really get their
coin purses (if you will) handed to them,
so to speak,
but I'm getting ahead of myself.

I think the message here,
right at the beginning is
Jesus isn't really breaking our laws
but if we can trick him
when it comes to money,
then that should really get the crowd angry.
And that is a good strategy,
because when you start talking about money
people listen.
So in essence,
Put your money where your mouth is, rabbi.

They start out with,
almost a compliment sandwich
—you know, start with a compliment,
hit 'em with criticism,
and then compliment again.
So the religious leaders start out with,
“Teacher, we know that you are sincere,
and teach the way of God
in accordance with truth...”
Then they hit him with a veiled critique,
“..[you] show deference to no one;
for you do not regard people with partiality.”
That is gut punch,
because of course there are differences
between people, right?
Some are rich, some are poor.
Some are clean, some are unclean.
Some are Jews and some are not.

There is definitely partiality
in the laws we follow Jesus.

But Jesus if you are wise enough to bend the rules,
 “Tell us, then, what you think.
 Is it lawful to pay taxes
 to the emperor, or not?”

We go from people to money.
 In the Pharisaic economy the money
 is more important,
 than the giving.
 But in God’s economy
 the giving is more important
 than the money.

There are laws we follow Jesus
 and you are bending them too far, they say.

Those laws, the ones
 the Pharisees held on so tightly to,
 included tithing.
 And tithing doesn’t just mean giving it means giving a certain
 amount...and I know you can tell me
 what amount the number is...
 (10%)

The principle of giving
 that magical number of 10%
 appears first when Abraham meets Melchizedek,
 the priest of the Most High God
 and “in a fit of awe and reverence,”
 gives him 10% of everything he has.
 Jacob later on promises God 10%
 of everything he has
 if God would deliver Jacob to Haran safely.
 Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy
 all incorporate that 10% into the laws of God.
 The church in the middle ages
 makes it law and would have sent
 the sheriff after you
 if you didn’t pay.
 But surely there is more to tithing
 than just the number 10.²

Surely this is more about giving than the money?

Rev. Albert C. Winn points out 4 principles
 that push tithing past just the number 10.

² This and the following principles of tithing are based on the sermon by Rev. Albert C. Winn, Tithing Is More Than the Number Ten. Published by Congregational Ministries Division, Stewardship Edition, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

His four principles are:
the principle of regularity,
the principle of proportionality;
the principle of priority;
and my favorite, the principle of risk.

Winn suggests that we think
about tithing, the way we give our money,
beyond that 10%.
Take regularity for example.

Regular giving, week in and week out,
flexes and works our giving muscle
just like going to the gym
day in and day out.



Think about how many things
in our life we do on the reg;
grocery shopping, paying bills,
bathing, coming together here in this place.
Those are all good healthy things!
We make sure our children go to school
because of things they need to learn
in the classroom and at the bus stop.

Regular attendance
teaches them about structure and discipline
—it says eve when we don't want to go,
we go.

Regular giving takes giving
out of the realm of mood.
It isn't something we do when we feel like it,
or if we're happy with the preacher.
In some ways it teaches us
to deal with our grief
over parting with our money.

“Money is part of our life.
Money represents days and hours
of sweat and tears.
Money is a very part of you,
and to part with it is a grief process.”³
Giving regularly takes a little of that pain away.

John McMullen says
that when we tell people to give until it hurts,
we realize that people’s pain threshold
is pretty low.⁴

And so regular giving
also makes us look honestly at our giving.
If we haven’t given in a while
and suddenly our heart strings are pulled
and we give a \$100,
we deceive ourselves that we’re very generous
—but if that is parsed out into weeks of a few dollars,
then most of us can’t claim
that as a very generous gift.⁵

Understanding the proportional nature of giving
is also important.
Jesus says as much
when he tells the parable
of the priest who thinks he is a shining star
giving the correct 10% of everything he has
in contrast to the tax collector who,
beating his breast
doesn’t even give.

It isn’t always about the amount you give.
Some of us can give that 10%
and some of us can’t.
And some of us can give even more than 10%.

One of the things we hope you heard
in the capital campaign meetings
is that the church expects
equal sacrifice, not equal giving.
Just like the grief process

³ ibid

⁴ ibid

⁵ ibid

of parting with our money,
we all know that giving
is equally sacrificial for all of us.
“You should total up your income,
your resources, your blessings,
in order to determine
what share God would have you give.
Ask, what proportion can I return
for God’s work in order to signify
and symbolize and confess
before everyone
that all I am
and all I have
comes from God?”⁶

And though we won’t all give the same amount,
as people who love God
and each other and the world,
we can make our giving to God a priority.
We ought to give to God first,
not last.
God’s share ought to come
from the top, not the bottom.

I can explain this at my house
as strawberries.
I love strawberries.
My girls love strawberries.
And because I love my girls
and my girls love strawberries,
they get first dibs.
I can’t tell you the last time
I’ve had a strawberry at home.
I wouldn’t dream of eating
all the red, ripe strawberries
and then giving my kids
the rotten, moldy and unripe ones.
Priorities help us organize our lives.
When we give to God first,
it is our chance
to put our coin purses
where our hearts are.

⁶ ibid



Finally there is risk involved in our giving.

And that is what makes this fun.

Winn suggests that if we actually
give God the priority,
take God's share off the top,
then we begin to live adventurously.

To give by nature is to take a risk.

The true meaning of risk
when it comes to money
is to acknowledge that the outcome
of your giving or your investment
isn't ultimately up to you.

Sometimes we might give

thinking that we will of course get back
what we give 100% of the time.

Well that may happen,

I mean "almost everything happens sometimes"
but this almost never happens.⁷

Adventurous living means we are okay with that.

Maybe if we really think about it,

a gift isn't a gift
if there isn't risk.

Maybe our giving isn't really giving
if it is safe and guarded.

Maybe we should all be willing
to be more risky in our giving
of our money. Maybe?

So what does the New Testament

say about our tithing?

Well as it turns out, not much is said
about that 10% tithing.

Jesus talked a lot about money
but not terribly much about tithing;
which doesn't mean it isn't important.

But what little it does say, should give us
the assurance that our giving is

⁷ ibid

important, it should be
regular, proportionate,
prioritized, and will probably
involve some risk.

In our Matthew passage
the tithers want Jesus to come down
hard and fast in a way that will either,
embarrass him or anger the crowds.

What he ends up doing
is asking them (and us)
to take a risk.

When the priests want to know
whether it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar,
Jesus turns the question,
meant to lead to a hard and fast answer
in one direction of a law
(so that Jesus could be easily punished)
Jesus turns that question
into an opportunity
to risk trusting your giving to God.

His answer that explains
'you give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar
and give to God what belongs to God'
means I am not here
to give you the hard and fast answer
so that you can throw the law at people;
in the grace and freedom I bring,
you are responsible for your giving.

So the risk of tithing,
of giving to God
is an invitation to live the adventure
that is lived in the freedom
and grace of Christ.

500 years ago,
in some ways the Reformation was started
with a building project.
It led to a reform in our churches that saw
the freedom and grace that Jesus brings.
Tithing and building projects aren't about
a magical number or amount.
They aren't just a means to an end.
Instead our giving invites us to risk
living in a freedom that says
give to God what belongs to God.

And just in case it is helpful
to be reminded
what belongs to God,



The Heidelberg Catechism says it so well:

A. [That] I am not my own,¹
but belong— body and soul,
in life and in death—²
to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.³
Because I belong to him,
Christ, by his Holy Spirit,
assures me of eternal life⁹
and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready
from now on to live for him.¹⁰

“You make all things new, in places we don’t choose.”