

“A Grateful Response”

A sermon by the Rev. Jim Bell

Duke Memorial United Methodist Church
Durham, NC
10:55 a.m. Sunday, October 1, 2006

Text: Genesis 28:10-22 II Corinthians 8:8-15 NRSV

Opening prayer: Almighty and gracious God, open our hearts to hear and receive your words of truth for us today, so that we may respond in joyful obedience. Amen.

When Jacob left Beersheba, he was in a jam. He had tricked his older brother, Esau, out of his inheritance and blessing from their father, Isaac. Esau was seeking to kill him. Jacob was fleeing for his life. He begins a journey to travel to Haran, to live with his Uncle Laban. He is traveling across desolate desert. Darkness falls, and he stops for the night. He is alone. He is anxious. He faces an unknown future.

As he sleeps, he dreams. Jacob dreams of a ladder reaching all the way to heaven. Angels are climbing up and down the ladder. The Lord speaks to him in the dream. God tells him, “I will give the land on which you lie to you and your descendants. I will be with you and will keep you wherever you go.” (28:13, 15)

Jacob exclaims, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God.” When Jacob awakens in the morning, he builds an altar. He proclaims his faith in God. He says, “The Lord shall be my God, . . . and of all that you give me, I will surely give one tenth to you.” (28:22)

Out of gratitude to God, Jacob made a commitment to give the Lord a tenth of all that God would give him. We tithe out of a grateful response to God. To tithe is to return 10% of our income to the Lord.

I tithe. I give 10% and more of my income to God’s work in the world. When I

was a Duke Divinity School intern at Jackson United Methodist Church one summer, I remember a discussion we were having about tithing. Someone asked, “Do you tithe your gross income or your net income?” A man named Marvin Coleman responded, “It depends upon whether you want the Lord to bless you based on your gross or on your net.” I want the Lord to bless me based on my gross! I tithe my gross income.

I tithe because I believe in the authority of God and God’s Word in my life. We could take time now to examine all of the passages in the Bible that instruct us to tithe and give in proportion to our income. You can relax, because I am not going to do that today. However, tithing and proportionate giving is a clear biblical teaching, from Abraham to Jacob to Moses to Amos to Malachi to the apostle Paul.

I tithe because I want to be a part of something larger than me. I feel called to be part of a mission larger than me or my family, or this congregation or my lifetime. When I give to God’s work in the world, that is what happens. When I spend money on myself, I am only looking at my own needs. When I buy a shirt, I buy it for me. When I give to the church, I am a part of something that is far greater than me.

A number of years ago there was a terrible earthquake in Alaska. Anchorage was devastated. A number of people wrote to the governor and demanded that he do certain things for them. They outlined the suffering that they had endured and demanded that the state take responsibility. Later the governor appeared on television and reported that, along with all the demands, he had received a letter from a boy. The boy had mailed him a 3” x 5” card and had taped two nickels to the card. On the card the boy had written these words, “Use this wherever it is needed. If you need more, let me know.”

That boy wanted to help those earthquake victims. He wanted to be a part of something greater than himself.

I tithe because I want to support the mission of this church. I see the positive, helpful and transforming impact that this church has on the lives of children and youth. It

is so crucial today to model and teach children how to live as a Christian. This church is actively seeking to reach out and invite and welcome and involve new people. We want to tell them about Jesus' love. I want to support that mission.

This church provides support and significant help to people during times of crisis. Sometimes it is during the death of a family member. Sometimes it is during serious illness or hospitalization. At times it is when the lights and heat are about to be turned off by the utility company.

Our church, along with other United Methodist churches, supports missionaries and mission workers in 90 different countries, like Bob and Hazel Terhune in Japan, and Herbert and Mary Zigbuo in Liberia, and Lynn and Sharon Fogleman in the foothills of eastern Kentucky.

Our mission is to share Christ from the heart of Durham. We want to be a Christ-centered church that is vital and vibrant, that is involved in ministries that have a significant impact upon people. We strive to be a place where people can encounter hope for their lives and experience love.

We recently launched our new Soul Café. This is a creative initiative to become a community center where people can grow in their relationship with one another and with God. I tithe because I want to support this mission.

I tithe because I want to honor the Lord Jesus Christ with my life. Tithing is a meaningful way for me to honor God. It is a meaningful spiritual discipline – like praying and reading the Bible and worshipping.

Gordon Cosby served as the pastor of Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C. Prior to that, he was the pastor of a small Baptist congregation in a railroad town just outside of Lynchburg, Virginia. A member of the Board of Deacons sent for Gordon one day and told him that he wanted his help. He said, “We have in our congregation a widow with six children. I have looked at the records and discovered that each month

she is putting a tithe of her income into the treasury of the church. Of course, she is unable to do this. We want you to go and talk to her. Let her know that she needs to feel no obligation whatsoever, and free her from the responsibility.”

Gordon writes, “I am not wise now. I was less wise then. I went and told her of the concern of the deacons. I told her as graciously and as supportively as I knew how that she was relieved of the responsibility of giving. As I talked with her, tears came into her eyes. She replied, ‘I want to tell you that you are taking away the last thing that gives my life dignity and meaning.’”

I have pastored Christians for whom tithing was that important. Telling that widow not to tithe was like telling her that she couldn’t pray or she couldn’t come to worship or she couldn’t trust God with everything that was important to her in life. That widow was grateful to God and she wanted to be able to express it in her giving.

Tithing is a very important spiritual discipline for some people. It was for the widow in Jesus’ day who walked to the Temple to place two copper coins in the treasury.

I tithe because I am grateful for what the Jesus Christ has done for me. The apostle Paul writes the Corinthians, “You know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.” (II Cor. 8:9) God has created me in his own image. God has redeemed me from sin and death through the sacrifice of his Son, Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit sustains me every day. Like God told Jacob, the Lord is with me wherever I go. I am so thankful for that.

I tithe because I am committed to Jesus Christ and the mission of this church. I tithe because I am grateful to God. Today I invite you to join Jacob and me and a number of people in our congregation, and become a tither -- out of grateful response to God. Amen.