

Sermon Title: Firstfruits

Text: Genesis 28:10-22; Nehemiah 10:37; Luke 11:42

By: Rev. Terry Carty

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Place: Kingston Springs United Methodist Church

Season: Eighth Sunday after Pentecost; Proper 14; Ordinary 19; Intentional Giving Emphasis

Main Point: When we give to support our point of need, we give to support our own work and we usually give from our leftovers. Our faith depends on putting God first and being intentional about giving to the work that God is doing.

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It was a warm summer morning and my eighth grade Sunday school classroom had been particularly warm. After Sunday school I had used my last quarter in the machine to buy an ice cold Coke in a small bottle which I drank in about three gulps. Now the moment came that I had not thought of as I enjoyed my Coke. The offering plate was passed to me and I no money to put in it.

It is embarrassing to let the offering plate pass without putting something in it. I don't know if that was the original reason intent for passing the offering plate, but it certainly works - guilt. We know it is coming, we often dread it. Even if we have already given a monthly contribution or if we give by automatic withdrawal electronically, we are embarrassed to pass the plate without putting something in it.

There were at least two things that I had lost sight of that morning. Both of these two things were principles that I had been taught in my church membership classes. One was the importance of the tithe. The other was an emphasis on firstfruits.

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I can't remember when I wasn't expected to put something in the offering plate. My mom or dad would put a dime in my fat little hand as they delivered me to Sunday school as a toddler so I could put it in the Sunday school offering. Then in worship mom or dad would put a larger coin - a quarter - in my little hand so I could put it in the brass plate as it came around. It just always happened that way, every week.

By the time I had reached eighth grade I was getting a weekly allowance and expected manage it - including giving a portion in the offering on Sunday. As I remember I was getting seven dollars a week for allowance. That didn't count my lunch ticket at school. My needs were few and the allowance afforded me an occasional guilty pleasure.

But as my allowance had grown, I forgot or ignored all that I had learned about the principle of giving God a tithe - 10%. That summer morning I should have reserved 70 cents to split between Sunday school and church. I was still focused on giving that quarter in the offering plate. And I am now embarrassed to say that when I was 16 and

had my first job, I still gave a quarter. And when I went away to college and would come home on weekends, I would drop that measly quarter in the plate when it came by.

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This morning I read you just one verse from the book of Nehemiah. Ezra and Nehemiah were leaders who worked to reconstitute loyalty to God in Jerusalem. They focused on rebuilding the Temple and getting back to the fundamentals of the Hebrew faith.

Looking back today, I realize the same thing that Nehemiah did more than three centuries before Christ: my lack of discipline in giving to God's work in the church reflected my inattention to my life with God. Like my finances, my life had grown but my faith had stayed immature.

I believe that that it takes discipline to keep ourselves focused on what God is doing in the world and in our lives. The discipline of giving is so far beyond simply supporting the work and life of the church. You have heard the expression "put your money where your mouth it." Giving - especially tithing - is putting our money where we want our lives to be focused.

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The second principle that I lost sight of that seventh grade Sunday was the concept of giving our firstfruits to God. Actually, I probably never really understood this concept. It did not seem to matter whether I gave to God first or gave to God last - I mean, a quarter is a quarter - right? But that morning the last quarter was gone - I had thought more about myself than I had about God - until the offering plate came around. Then I felt guilt.

I don't think that God wants us to give out of our guilt. I don't think that God even really requires our firstfruits. God wants us to do justice and love God. God does not want to be an afterthought. God does not want us sometimes think, "oh yes, here's something for you. Sorry I only had a quarter left."

We pride ourselves in our firstfruits. "This is my oldest child." "Here, framed beside the cash register, is the first dollar we took in." "Look, its the first tomato to ripen on the vine I have tended."

The ancients gave their firstfruits to God because these were the things they we most proud of. They brought grain offerings, they made burnt offerings of their first calf of the season and everyone in the village gather to eat the meat, they offered the life of their first child dedicated to the service of God. They did not give out of guilt. They gave out of discipline, dedication, and love for God's reign in their lives.

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This week you will receive a letter from me that will ask you to write down your estimate of what you intend to give to the church in the foreseeable future. We are not asking for a pledge, only an estimate.

But I encourage you to think about what this opportunity means to your growth in faith maturity. Think about the function of the tithe and the giving of firstfruits throughout our religious ancestry. These have served to give people discipline that puts God's kingdom and God's work first in their lives rather than making God an afterthought acknowledged by leftovers.

As you prepare your estimate of giving, I encourage that you not look just at the need of the church budget. When we do that, we are often really just giving to support our own point of need - the ministries that we have determined important for our church. We are often not giving out of a sense of our participation in the work of God.

I call you to reflect on 'what is your harvest?' How do you count your yield? What are your firstfruits. How do you determine the percentage that you give to God?

Instead of thinking of our budget, think of your life with God. How does this discipline of giving help you to 'walk humbly with your God?'