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Eastertide  
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## The Discipline of Stewardship

Matthew 6:19-34 *For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.  
No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one  
and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other.  
You cannot serve God and wealth.*

*We, members of the Church of the Covenant, do covenant with one another  
That each of us will:  
Give through this expression of the Church at least a tithe of the income  
which is entrusted to my stewardship as a token expression of God's  
total claim on my total life.*

*(from "Our Covenant One with Another")*

### Discipline of Tithing

In "Our Covenant One with Another," the membership statement of our church, those becoming members of the Church of the Covenant commit to--*Give through this expression of the Church at least a tithe of the income which is entrusted to my stewardship as a token expression of God's claim on my total life.* It is easy to focus on the first part—the tithe--and miss its connection with the second part—the stewardship of our whole lives.

Some of us struggle with the tithe, understood as ten per cent of our income. Tithing is thoroughly biblical. The tithe of crops, cattle, or goods was understood as a representative gift to God. One did not give a tenth to God, thinking that the rest was personal property. The tithe represented the whole. Everything belongs to God. In spite of our ingrained notions of earning and deserving, we own nothing. Elaine Marie Prevallet reminds us that the traditional vow of poverty is a reminder that "nothing *belongs* to any of us." That is the biblical view.

The discipline of tithing leads us into the stewardship of all of life. Stewardship means living as those who know that everything is a gift from God, entrusted to our care for the good of all people and the earth itself. We can achieve a ten percent level of financial giving and never get to the heart of the matter—a life of simplicity that is focused on loving God with our whole being.

Kaye was talking with a black Disciples of Christ minister a couple of weeks ago. He was curious about this little church her husband had gone to. When Kaye described the way we define membership, the minister was surprised that tithing seemed so special. In black congregations, he reported, tithing is simply expected of everyone. We need not feel too special about this discipline of tithing. There are a great many Christians, many quite poor, who tithe as a matter of course.

The discipline of tithing keeps before us the relationship of our faith to our money, which is frequently where the rubber meets the road when it comes to faith and practice. The reasons we struggle with tithing can reveal important growing edges for us. Where is our security, really? In God or in material comfort? How do we spend our money? On real needs, or on desires our culture has injected into our souls? Is our expressed concern for the poor affecting our own financial resources? The struggle toward tithing can open up great spiritual growth and help us see the ways in which we can live more concretely for the needs of others and in greater harmony with all of life.

### More Than Tithing

However, we can become tithers and never get to the heart of the matter, which is our own hearts! Richard Foster, in his book Freedom of Simplicity, reminds us that tithing in Hebrew

scriptures was the recognition of God's claim on our total lives, as "Our Covenant One with Another" states. And yet, it is curious that neither Jesus nor Paul make anything of tithing. They don't make tithing into a law or even a mark of discipleship. Weren't Jesus and Paul concerned about faith and our material lives? Of course they were. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns of the dangers of attachments to wealth or physical comfort. He laid down the gauntlet clearly: you can serve either God or wealth, but not both. Jesus sought to cut the cord of our possessiveness. Foster puts it this way: *The tithe simply is not a sufficiently radical concept to embody the carefree unconcern for possessions that marks life in the Kingdom of God. Jesus Christ is the Lord of all our goods, not just ten percent. It is quite possible to obey the law of the tithe without ever dealing with our mammon lust.* [p. 50]

Like the other disciplines, financial stewardship is aimed not at fulfilling some spiritual law but at our rebirth, our transformation as those who belong to God's reign. The section of the Sermon on the Mount we heard this morning begins with the attachment of our hearts to wealth and material security, but moves on to Jesus' words about freedom from anxiety and complete trust in God for our care.

The creation is our "school." Jesus pointed to birds and flowers as our teachers. The birds of the air neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet God feeds them. The flowers of the field neither toil nor spin, and yet God adorns them with more splendor than King Solomon's glorious wealth. Therefore, says Jesus, we are to learn deep in our hearts to not be anxious and worried, but to live freely and gratefully.

Jesus' words sound foolish. Doesn't he know about the cost of living? Doesn't he know about the need for investments against future expenses or how much it costs to provide our kids a college education? Doesn't he care about job insecurity these days? Yes, he knows all that. And still he says to us, "Do not be anxious. Learn to trust God in all things. Let go of your anxiety and worry." The truly carefree life is not found in financial affluence. Neither is it found in the idealizing of economic poverty. The carefree life comes from lives centered in God, learning what it means to trust God in all things. Only such a life can enter into the simplicity, the joy, and the generosity that are our created nature.

We each need to examine our lives and our spirits to find out where we are still anxious and imprisoned because of the idolatry of material things. If our sense of worth and well-being is still attached to what clothes we wear, the kinds of cars we drive or houses we live in, if we are still spending more than we have because of what we want but do not need, then our security is not where it needs to be if we are to know true security. If our giving to others still has strings attached to it and we experience little joy in our giving, then we are still under the illusion that we are owners, using our giving as a means of control. Jesus said to the rich young man that in order to find eternal life he needed to sell everything, give the proceeds to the poor, and then follow him. Jesus' answer to our insecurity and bondage to material things is so simple and straightforward that it takes our breath away. But he lays out the path clearly, and though we may not be very far along that path in our own spiritual journeys, it is still the way of life.

The discipline of stewardship is part of that personal transformation that liberates us to be our God-created selves. The New Testament scholar Marcus Borg writes: "The fruit of an anxious heart, concerned about its own well-being is bitter. What is needed is a new heart, a pure heart, for such a heart produces good fruit." [*Jesus: A New Vision*, p. 110] The centering of our hearts in God alone is the one true way of peace and the truly carefree life.

### The Wider Context

Elaine Marie Prevallet widens the context of our spiritual lives. Her book *In the Service of Life* places the traditional vows of her community, the Sisters of Loretto, in the context and crisis of the

environment. We are part of the earth community, and as followers of Jesus—the center of a new creation, as Paul says in his Letter to the Colossians—our spiritual lives and our life together as a faith community need to be seen in this wider view.

In the Genesis 1 creation story, human beings are not created first but last. We are set within a fabric of creation and given a particular role. We are dependent upon the rest of created life. We also are given stewardship within the creation. When God gives human beings “dominion” over the creation, this cannot be understood as domination and absolutely not as the freedom to use the earth for our own selfish and destructive ends. We are caretakers of that which does not belong to us. And we must find our place within a created world that lives by cooperation, by giving and receiving. Elaine writes that “the acceptance of our fundamental poverty issues in a life of gratitude.” Like our discipline of financial stewardship, the vow of poverty should “free us to be generous, to share,” writes Elaine. As we live into our financial stewardship, we find a growing, deepening awareness that we must live in a cooperative, life-giving “solidarity with the rest of creation, and most especially with the poor of the world.”

The discipline of financial stewardship in this church is the recognition of God’s claim on our total life. That means our lives in all their relationships with the creation and especially people who suffer because they do not have enough in a world in which there is plenty for everyone. Our greed and our idolatrous attitudes of ownership and accumulation keep others in need. Our false understanding of ourselves as dominators and owners has brought increasing destruction to the creation. The price is not only the suffering of others and the creation, but our own spiritual health.

Elaine says that there are negative and positive functions in vows, or disciplines. Committing ourselves to stewardship means doing without some things and asking ourselves hard questions about what we truly need. It means changing the ways we understand life and our place in it, and changing our behavior accordingly. It means remembering the poor, not forgetting them or soothing our consciences with justifications. It means willingly wrestling with the guilt of those who have more than they need when the majority of the world’s people do not have enough.

Yet the positive function of the discipline of stewardship is our recovery of our true selves. God has made us to be givers and receivers, to find and take our places within the life-giving rhythms of creation. Along this path, we rediscover our spiritual health and well-being, which come from living with open hands and not clenched fists. We also recover our deep sense of belonging to the creation, our home. From isolation and alienation, we move toward communion with the rest of creation and with God. When we are living as those who love and trust in God alone, at the center of our being, we are on the journey toward true and deep inner peace. We are also on the journey of life in which all people have enough.

Along this journey of stewardship, centering our hearts more and more in God, we live into the truth of Jesus’ words: *But strive first for the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*