

Epistle Article

Dear Friends,

One of the most intimidating words in the Christian life is ‘tithing.’ For many of us, it may come across as a churchy word that has something to do with money and something to do with God’s judgment. I write to you this month to share my own reflections and experiences with this big word.

There is no question that ‘tithing’ is a profound challenge. The simple definition is to give away 10% of your pre-tax income. The average American gives between 1% and 2% of their income. So, for most, the call to give 10% would represent a very significant shift in lifestyle and priorities because to tithe would mean to be giving away money- an additional 8% to 9%- that would otherwise be used on things in our lives that have come to seem important, if not essential.

However, the word isn’t simply church code for ‘give more to our institution rather than some other non-profit.’ It’s a word that comes from the book that is at the center of our lives together, the Bible. The Bible is very concerned with how we order our lives and what we do with what God has given us. The Ten Commandments are the prime example. In our Godly Play classrooms these are known as the ‘ten best ways.’ They are the ‘best ways’ because even though some of them run against our instincts, God knows that they ultimately lead to our thriving.

The Biblical practice of tithing is something like a double edged sword. On one hand, the practice can seem very restrictive. 10% is an awful lot of our income, and if we were to look at our budgets, we will probably see that it would restrict some things to which we are accustomed and that give us pleasure. But tithing, like all God’s commandments, promises a deeper freedom and leads to our thriving. How can this be?

I can only speak from my own, new experience. Chloe and I started out, many years ago, with what I’ve come to see is a pretty standard first pledge to the church- \$1200 which is, of course, \$100 a month. For many years our pledge, which grew slightly, lagged behind our growing commitment to Jesus and the church. Nine years ago, we finally found ourselves in a Christian community that was clear and courageous in challenging its members to give generously. Our financial commitment to the church began to grow significantly and in one year it doubled. Still we were short of the Biblical 10% goal.

Last year, for the first time, Chloe and I gave an honest 10% of our pre-tax income to the church. Although we’d been working towards this goal for a long time I was taken by surprise by the shift that happened in me. Over the last year since we’ve tithed, three of the most important relationships in my life have shifted for the better. The first is with money. Although Chloe and I have always had the good fortune of having financial resources, money was always a source of anxiety for me. In my teen years, my family struggled with debt. I was afraid to talk openly and confidently about money in my own life and our decisions about what we were called to do with that. This year, that fear has dissolved and I have nothing to explain for it other than our shift to tithing. Tithing took away my fear.

It has shifted my relationship to St. Paul's. I'm sure you know how deeply I have a desire that we thrive and grow. A constant sense of tension for me has been the classic discrepancy between my desire and contribution and that of the parish. I will admit that I would feel, from time to time, some resentment that Chloe and I were by far some of the generous givers to St. Paul's. Why weren't others stepping up? This resentment too has vanished. It is as though tithing has reframed my giving so that I feel just like, in the first instance, it is a gift we are giving to God and not for the 'success' of St. Paul's. I know that St. Paul's is excellent stewards of the money given to the church, but that's not ultimately what will cause us to grow and thrive- the source of all life and growth is God alone. Tithing has helped me remember that.

Finally, I feel a shift in my relationship to God. I want to be very careful here. Jesus has very harsh words for religious leaders who are proud of their tithing. Tithing won't win us the kingdom of heaven any more than trying to be good will. Only God's grace saves us. However, I feel a new lightness and freedom in my relationship to God that wasn't there before. It is as though, by really putting our financial resources into proper perspective with the spiritual practice of tithing, I am free to focus even more of my attention on the one thing that will never leave me, God's love.

Our next step is to become even more transparent together about our money. When it comes to leadership in Stewardship, one of my teachers is the Rt. Rev. Greg Rickel, who is the Bishop on the Diocese of Olympia and a national leader in Stewardship. He wrote a letter to the whole Diocese sharing his finances and exactly how he and his wife tithed. When I've asked if we're ready for that here, I've gotten a clear, unambiguous and unanimous 'NO!' I understand and share the fear. But it makes me wonder. What, for God's sake, are we afraid of?

Peace,

Christopher