

I must say there are some colorful characters found in the Bible. If you don't believe me, read the Books of Genesis and Judges. One such character is Jacob. Jacob, born of Isaac and Rebekah, father Abraham's grandson, the second born of twins who from birth tried to secure first born status over his brother Esau. Jacob was known as the trickster. For a cup of stew Jacob conned his brother Esau out of his birthright, the rights associated with being firstborn. He hoodwinked his blind and feeble father into believing he was giving the coveted father's blessing to Esau when in fact it was Jacob in disguise.

After that bit of shenanigans it was time for Jacob to get out of Dodge. To protect her favorite son from the wrath of his brother, mother Rebekah secured his father's permission for Jacob to go east to Haran, the home of grandfather Abraham. In Haran, Jacob was to find a wife from within the family network, one whose faith traditions and customs were consistent with their own.

Jacob may have done some stupid, self-serving and impulsive things in his lifetime but he was not a stupid man. He wasted no time in leaving home. On his journey east, he stopped to sleep in a part of the land that seemed barren, like a wasteland. As he slept he had a very vivid dream. He dreamt of a ladder connecting the earth with heaven. On the ladder were angels, ascending and descending. And the voice of God spoke to Jacob in the dream. God reminded Jacob of the covenant made with grandfather Abraham and how the promise carried from father to son to father to son. The covenant would be fulfilled through Jacob.

When Jacob awoke he had an epiphany. He was surprised to discover that in this barren place, God was. And so he made an altar to God and promised to give a tenth of everything he receives from God back to God. Jacob has agreed to give a tithe of his flocks, his produce, everything he and his family procures back to God.

Giving back to God was a command given to the Israelites just before they entered the Promised Land. They were reminded that faithfulness meant offering the first fruits of their labors to God in gratitude for all God had done and continued to do for them.¹ The offering of first fruits was to be dedicated to God to maintain the welfare of the Levites, the priests, also known as the sons of Aaron.² The first fruits were also shared with those in need, those who had no

¹ Leviticus 23:10

² Numbers 18

means of growing their own food - the aliens, the widows, and the orphans.³ The giving of first fruits was meant to be a way of life.

It is amazing how something that is so much part of life can get lost in the struggles of everyday living. When the people returned to Jerusalem from Babylon, after having been forced from their homes by the conquering Babylonians, Nehemiah needed to remind the faithful gathered of their responsibility to give of their first fruits to God. They were to give of their livestock and the produce from the ground. Even their sons were to be dedicated to God. God's message to those freed from Egyptian slavery was reinforced; giving first fruits to God would help the people to faithfully dedicate their lives to God.

But as typical, we humans have short memories. Scripture tells us of the many Israelite kings who lost sight of the covenant and so instituted laws and practices deemed to be an abomination to God. But Hezekiah was a king with a different agenda. During a public reading of parts of the Torah, Hezekiah and the people rediscovered the importance of the covenant. Hezekiah helped the people tear down pagan totems and reinstated the call to faithfully give of their first fruits, as a pleasing sacrifice to God. Giving of first fruits was an outward sign of their dedication to living according to God's ways.⁴

We hear the word first fruits often in Hebrew Scripture, but just what is meant by first fruits? First fruits are the first of the harvest or the first born of a flock. Being first they symbolically were deemed to be the best – that is they did not have a chance to rot on the vine. And if it was livestock, the young were given rather than one that was old and tough. Giving of first fruits was a form of thanksgiving for what God had done and a rededicating and refocusing of one's life to God.

First fruits consisted of a tithe. While we know of a tithe as a pledge or an offering, an offering or a pledge are not necessarily equal to a tithe. According to scripture, a tithe equals 10% of ones resources or income. Leviticus makes it clear that a tithe comes from anything grown in the land, the seed of the ground or the fruit of the tree or vine. For every ten apples picked, one goes to God. A tithe also includes one out of every ten of your herd or flock. Such offerings are considered holy.⁵ And when it came to one's children, first fruits meant dedicating a child in service to God. The prophet Samuel was the only child his

³ Deuteronomy 26

⁴ 2 Chronicles 31

⁵ Leviticus 27:30-33.

mother Hannah bore. Even so she fulfilled the promise made to dedicate her son's life to serving God.

While tithing and giving first fruits to God is a topic of conversation throughout the Hebrew Bible the importance of proper tithing does not escape Jesus' attention. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus chastises the Pharisees for being inconsistent in their tithing. They are known to tithe of their resources even down to the herbs and spices in their gardens. But they fail to tithe in other ways. Jesus is upset as they fail when it comes to justice, mercy and faithful living. He has difficulty with their focus on the minutia of life – such as filtering gnats from drinks - while ignoring the bigger issues they should be attending to. While both gnats and camels were considered to be ritually unclean, not enough time was being spent on the injustices in society, that no one wanted to address, the proverbial elephant in the room, or in this case, the camel.

Jesus is echoing Proverbs where we are told to honor the Lord with our substance. In some Bibles the word for substance has been translated as wealth. But substance goes beyond wealth as it also means essence. If we are honoring God with our essence we are honoring God from the core of our being. Our total way of living, including our financial giving, reflect our dedication to God and our determination to living according to God's ways.

But to give to God from the gifts we have been given takes trust and courage. Trust that God will provide what we need which may or may not be what we want. Courage to trust that if we give God the first fruits of our labors there will be enough to carry us through life.

To tithe requires a mindset, a way of living, and a set of priorities that puts God and the mission of God's church first in the world. Tithing is about a commitment to God. Tithing is about honoring the covenant that was established with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, and extends to followers of Jesus Christ, as we are members of the body of Christ. Tithing is about a determination to see this world become God's world.

And I hear ya'! How can one tithe when living on a fixed income with utility costs, property taxes, and insurance premiums going up by leaps and bounds? How can one tithe when it is all you can do to get food on the table? Maybe tithing is a discipline we need to teach ourselves. To tithe takes intentionality.

The easiest way to think of tithing is as giving of first fruits. In our world we don't typically give groceries or produce from our gardens, although that has been

known to happen. Most of us receive a paycheck, whether from an employer, the government, or a pension fund. The first fruits of our earnings, the \$1 out of every \$10 we receive, would be set aside for God's work in the world, before we go off and spend it.

In a Sunday school class with 5th and 6th graders, we were talking about tithing and the use of money according to John Wesley's formula to earn all you can, save all you can and give all you can. The children all said they didn't earn a paycheck. But some of them did say they got an allowance. Some got money for their birthdays or from the tooth fairy or from babysitting. As we were not talking to bank robbers or extortionists, we assured them the source of their money was not as important as what they did with their money.

So we suggested they set up three piggy banks. On one bank they would mark it For God. On another bank it would be marked "Savings". And the third bank was to be labeled "Spending." We encouraged them to put \$0.10 out of every dollar into the piggy bank For God and the same amount in the Savings piggy bank. The rest would go into the spending bank.

They all thought that was a good idea, an easy way to manage their money. That is until one child said he got \$30 for his birthday and what he wanted to buy was going to cost \$29.50 including tax. He went on to say if he put \$3.00 into the For God bank and \$3.00 into the Savings bank he would not have enough to buy the video game he wanted now rather than wait to see if he would given any money at Christmas. Which is the dilemma in our society – our determination to get what we want when we want it, a lack of trust that God will provide what we need, the limited use of our imaginations to fill in the gaps in our living, and the emphasis on me-ism, it is all about me.

When we dedicate our lives fully to God we shift our focus from me to us, to God's mission in the world. When we dedicate our lives fully to God we do so with our whole being, with all that we are as well as all that we earn. When we dedicate our lives fully to God we do all we can to ensure that all come to hear the word of God, and all come to know the message of God's peace and mercy and the abundance of God's gifts.

Focused on our abundance rather than viewing life from a perspective of scarcity we are able to give fully of our first fruits, just as God has asked. And guess what? It is Biblical! And so may it be. Amen