

My Stewardship Testimony  
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Fund Campaign for Our Roof and Steeple  
“Commitment Sunday”  
The Fourth Sunday of Easter, April 25, 2010

This is the bucket into which the raindrops fell. They fell through our honorable, old slate roof above, landing near the pulpit, a couple years ago now. In God’s grace, those falling raindrops inspired an anonymous \$50,000 leadership gift which started the path which has led to this good morning, Commitment Sunday, when we turn in our gifts or pledges toward a new roof for our church and steeple. I’m going to place this bucket on a stool there in our center aisle and you can drop your pledge form into it.

In my testimony now I mean to talk personally with you about Christian stewardship. I consider the management of our money to be an important part of our life in Christ. I mean to talk about my own personal example. I hope it might help you for me to talk a little bit about my paycheck, my tithe, and my pledge to this campaign. I am not going to talk about the concrete numbers here, but I am available to share those numbers with any of you in pastoral conversation. Still, I do mean to talk about the tithe and about what that means for our family.

But before I turn to such things, there is something on my heart to say: I have always tithed, but I have never before talked much about it. That’s because circumstances vary from person to person. I know how very blessed I am to be pastor of this congregation. I am deeply aware of the many kindnesses I have received simply because I am the pastor. And so, my tithe seems pretty humble compared to the blessings I have received.

But most of all, I hesitate to talk about my own giving to the church because I am aware of how modest my stewardship is compared to many of my brothers and sisters in the Lord. I have little to boast of compared to many quiet Christians I have known over the years.

I will never forget a poor, elderly woman in my first parish, down in York County, PA. She lived in a little, dimly-lit, smoky trailer. She cobbled together a humble living collecting things and selling them at her road side stand. She tithed! Gently I tried to suggest that she did not need to tithe, she had so very little money to give. But this dear old woman was wiser than me, wiser than this young pastor trying to minister to her. She said to me, “Pastor, I know you mean well, but please do not try to deprive me of my Christian life.” This was what mattered to her: she loved Jesus and wanted to support our congregation. She wanted to support the Church in the traditional way of the tithe.

I remember back to when I was a boy, to my childhood congregation. There was an earnest discussion back then concerning the tithe. A “tithe” means 10%. But even for Christians who wanted to tithe, there was an uncertainty about whether it should be 10% on income *before* taxes or *after* taxes. As I remember it, we concluded that either one was fine.

At first glance, it appears that I give a tithe on my income *before* taxes. My monthly paycheck is a certain figure. Again, I can tell you that in private conversation. My wife, Pastor Carol Fryer, gets her own paycheck and gives her own tithe to the congregation she serves, United Lutheran Church up in Mt. Vernon,

So, my paycheck is a certain figure and my tithe to Immanuel is 10% of that figure. (Actually, it is a wee bit more than 10%.) In one sense, that tithe is *before* taxes, because of a peculiarity of clergy taxes: we are considered “self-employed” for tax purposes, and so there is no tax withholding for me. I must then pay my taxes out of my paycheck. So, first off, I give my tithe to the church. I have set up my bank account to automatically send my tithe to the church first thing. Then I set aside another bunch of money for taxes. (Sometimes it seems like a BIG bunch of money.) Then our family lives off what’s left.

So, at first glance it appears that I tithe on my gross salary. But the reality is that my tithe falls short of that standard. It is closer to a tithe *after* taxes. Partly, that’s because when I set up this year’s automatic payment plan with my bank, I forgot that my paycheck is reduced some via a medical flex spending plan, and I should include that amount too. But the chief thing is the parsonage: I should give a tithe on the value of the parsonage too. The Board of Pensions considers the value of a parsonage to be worth 30% of my base salary. I pay Social Security tax on that amount. So, I made a rough estimate: I figure that my present tithe is approximately a tithe of my net income.

The thing about this campaign is that it has led me to do some soul-searching and some more careful calculations about the tithe. Carol and I have studied and discussed things and have decided that I can make a pledge of an additional \$100/month -- not just for the sake of this campaign, but also simply because I want to draw closer to the higher standard for the tithe. I wish it were more. Maybe I will give more as time goes by. Meanwhile, this additional amount places me somewhere in the middle of a tithe *after* taxes and a tithe *before* taxes.

In terms of day-to-day life over the years, this has meant that our family has inclined toward some simplicity in life. It has felt like Carol and I have lived from paycheck to paycheck all our lives. Especially it was hard to save up money for a college fund. I worked very hard at that over the years, and wish I could have done more. Things are getting better now that both Carol and I have fulltime salaries.

Why did I strive for the tithe all these years? Our Lutheran doctrine of the priesthood of all believers teaches that a pastor has no greater duty to tithe than does any other Christian. So, why did I tithe? Four quick answers: First, the Bible says so:

Bring the full tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house; and thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing. (Malachi 3:10, RSV)

Many Christians have understood the call to Israel to practice the tithe to be a call meant also for the Church.

Second, I have wanted to somehow be in the company of that elderly woman in the smoky trailer back in Pennsylvania. Likewise, I have wanted to be part of that band of people who include my mother and father before me and who also includes people in this congregation. The person to your left or right, for example, might be a tither. We have them in this congregation. They are quiet and humble about it, but they help make us strong.

Third, I calculate that the simplicity of life which comes along with tithing has done me no harm. Though I like pipes and the smell of pipe tobacco, for example, I do not smoke. I never felt I could afford it. But not smoking has done me no harm. I do not drink expensive wines or whiskey because I never thought I could afford them, but again, I think it has done me no harm. Simplicity is not a bad thing.

And fourth, the Church is important to me. This is what I care about a lot. And so I try to support the Church in the traditional way.

In general, I do believe that tithing has been crafting my soul, teaching me some contentment in life. As St. Paul said to young Timothy:

There is great gain in godliness with contentment (1 Timothy 6:6, RSV)

So, that's that. I am trying to use this roof campaign as an occasion for striving toward the tithe. And I commend the idea to you too. Circumstances vary. I bet many of you are already doing the best you can and you should do no more. But if you can, then I commend that you try to make some progress toward the tithe.

Thank you.