

Lev. 23:39-43 & Deut. 16:1-11

A month ago, Rabbi Jonathan Singer came to talk to us about Referendum 71. Some of you were there. He got to the subject in quite a rather round-about way. He started talking about the Jewish High Holy Days of Yom Kippur, a day of atonement, one of the most solemn days, followed by Sukkot or The Festival of Booths - one of the most joyous celebrations in Jewish life. Historically, Sukkot symbolizes the 40-year period when the children of Israel wandered in the desert, living in temporary shelters. Agriculturally, Sukkot is a harvest festival - a time to offer thanksgiving for the crops of the year. Some link the original Thanksgiving to this biblical understanding of Sukkot. When the early pilgrims were trying to find a way to express their thanks for survival and for the harvest, they looked to the Bible for an appropriate way of celebrating and found this festival.

Rabbi Singer explained that Jewish people are to live in booths/tents called a Sukkah, for seven days in memory of the period of wandering. Jewish people often decorate the sukkah. The roof is made of tree branches, corn stalks, bamboo. Rabbi Singer explained that it is an inclusive feast - inviting your friends to share the bounty - offering protection to the orphans, widows, and strangers in your midst.

As I thought about this festival, it made me think about the theological nature of stewardship, the understanding that all that we are and everything we have is a gift from God, and that we are to be good stewards of our land, our bodies, our talents, and our treasures. In the church, our annual financial campaigns, historically, were linked to the fall harvest. And perhaps because of the timing of the fiscal year, we only talk about stewardship in the fall, and equate stewardship only with the need to secure funding for the church operating budget for the following year. That's the practical nuts and bolts side of things. But often we lose the true spiritual and theological understanding of stewardship and offering God our "first fruits" from our harvest.

Harvest giving acknowledges God as Lord of the harvest, who gives rain, sun, soil, skills, intelligence and hope. The Biblical model of harvest giving was understood as offering back to God our First-fruits, a tithe of the year's harvest, given to God in gratitude. The Biblical standard is 10%. Want to know the average giving in mainline churches? Between 1% and 2%.

Talking about money in church is one of the three taboos (money, sex, and politics). We generally want to stay away from that which makes us uncomfortable. But not talking about money does not necessarily help our spiritual growth. Sometimes it is good practice to talk about the messages we received about money & stewardship, and to reflect how you feel about your giving patterns. Some people will use scripture to condemn and judge all kinds of things, but read the bible with blinders on when it comes to their financial life. In the Gospels alone, Money is mentioned in 16 out of 38 parables of Jesus. One out of every 10 verses in the gospels relates to money and possessions - that's about 10%. There are over 700 verses with the word love; 500 verses with prayer, around 500 have the word believe. 2000 verses include some form of the word give - give, giving, giver. Jesus talks more about giving than heaven or hell. There are more verses on giving than love, prayer, and believe combined. We could get the message that God wants to teach us about giving, and understand that giving, is a gift itself. It's about spiritual maturity. Jesus understood how money, or control of money, can short circuit our relationship with God.

Ultimately, stewardship is more wholistic and comprehensive than just our church budget, keeping the building repaired, the heat & lights on, funding our ministry programs, and keeping your staff paid. Yes, the money is useful, in order to be in ministry and to live into the future, the church needs funding. But stewardship is more than that. And as your pastor, I am going to be bold in saying that Stewardship is more about our spiritual need to give, than the church's need to balance its budget.

When God created humanity, I believe it was with DNA to be generous, with the willingness to give – to God and others. I believe that we actually have the need to be generous. Yet there are voices that war against our God-given impulse toward generosity, tempting us to protect, keep or hoard what we have. There is a voice of fear, which tells us, “If you give, there may not be enough left over for you.” There are times I am afraid to be generous because of what might happen to me. Yet hoarding offers no real security.

In Philippians Paul writes– *I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, I know what it is to have plenty.* When we think about the Festival of Succot, or Booths, when God calls the people to live in tents and remember their history, we too are called to find our tent to live in – which tent will it be? Con-tent-ment or discon-tent-ment? You alone can determine which tent will be yours. The moment we decide that life does not consist in the abundance of our possessions, then we are choosing the tent of contentment. And Gratitude is essential if we are to be content.

Stewardship is about gratitude & acknowledging God's abundance. Gratitude is the conscious choice to focus on life's blessings rather than on its shortcomings. It is out of the realization that all that we have is gift from God. Giving regularly of our time, talent, and financial resources to God's work on earth is as much a spiritual practice as prayer and worship.

Tithing can be a challenging idea for many of us. The way to begin is to start with 2 or 5 or 7% and increase incrementally. Two stories of tithing – I have a friend whose father died when she was 7, and her mother struggled financially. Yet every week, her mother would give 10%, and taught her daughter about First Fruits. She lived with a sense of God's abundance and the faith that God would supply their needs. Today my friend has the deep understanding of Stewardship –10% is her starting point, and she continually works to give beyond 10% to God.

And then there is my story. My family also struggled financially but lived out of scarcity. Even though I grew up in the church, it took a long time for me to move from a place of scarcity to trust in God's abundance and ability to provide for me. I had to grow into a tithe. But there came a period of my life where I simply committed 10% to God - regardless. A big percentage of that goes to the church, because I believe, in spite of brokenness and frailties, God continues to work through the church to bring about God's kingdom on earth. And in my spiritual life, I am trying to go beyond first fruits to give above and beyond to areas that I have a passion for.

As income grows, it may be easy to look at a tithe and think, that's a lot of money. Does God really want me to give 10% of that? There is a story by Peter Marshall, who was the chaplain of US Senate 1947-49. There was a man who struggled to tithe even though he had a large income. The man said to Marshall, *“I have a problem. I used to tithe regularly some years ago, but now I am earning 500,000 a year, and there is just no way I can afford to give \$50,000.”* Marshall reflected on this wealthy man's dilemma but gave no advice. He simply said, *“I can certainly see*

your problem. Let's pray about it." The man agreed. So Marshall bowed his head and prayed with boldness and authority, *"Heavenly Father, I pray that you would reduce this man's salary back to the place that he can afford to tithe."*

When we give generously, we become more generous. It is similar to love and gratitude. Sometimes we may not feel love, but when we choose to act in loving ways, loving feelings begin to flow. Sometimes we may not feel like giving thanks, but the best way to cultivate a heart of gratitude is to give thanks in all circumstances. Likewise the more we give, the more generous our hearts become.

Our generosity not only touches God, but it changes us. When we are not generous in giving what we have, we will encounter a spiritual problem of becoming self-absorbed, money-consumed people.

When we are generous we may find unexpected blessings flowing back into our lives. Now I want to be careful about what that means especially in light of reading Luke 6:37-38. We need to be careful of interpretation. There is the Bob Schuller of the Crystal Cathedral and Joel Osteen theology that God wants us to prosper – prosperity meaning, God wants us to be rich. The equation goes like this, "If you give, then God will give more back to you." But that's not how it works. We do not give to God so that we can get something in return. But when we give to God, and others the blessings of prosperity come back to us. I think of prosperity as quality of life. Quality is measured in relationship and contentment. Winston Churchill – *"We make a living by what we receive. Make a life – what we give."* Of course there is no guarantee that if you tithe you will never lose your job or never have other bad things happen to you.

And so we are called to do what seems absurd to the rest of our world. At whatever percentage we find ourselves, I invite you into and to continue the spiritual practice of giving generously, joyfully. We give because of our love for & gratitude to God, we give because we value this faith community, and finally we give because we believe that in giving, we genuinely receive. Gratitude itself becomes the gift, creating an endless waterfall, filling up and spilling over. We give it away in the form of time, talent and treasure, not because we have to but because we want to.

A stewardship campaign is simply an annual gratitude alert, calling us to recommit ourselves to giving thanks in concrete ways. In creating all things, God has made it possible for us to give back to God what is already God's.

One day the father of a very wealthy family took his son on a trip to the country with the firm purpose of showing his son how poor people live. He wanted his son to appreciate and acknowledge his own wealth. They spent a couple of days and nights on a rural and rundown farm . There was much hard work and little food or comfort. On their return from their trip, the father asked, "How was the trip?"

"It was great, Dad."

"Did you see how poor people live?" the father asked.

"Oh yeah."

"So, what did you learn?"

"I saw that we have one dog and they had four. We have a pool that reaches to the middle of our garden and they have a creek that has no end. We have imported lanterns in our garden and they have the stars at night. Our patio reaches to the front yard; they have the whole horizon.

We have a small piece of land to live on and they have fields that go beyond our sight. We have servants who serve us, but they serve others. We buy our food, but they grow theirs. We have walls around our property to protect us, they have friends to protect them."

The boy's father was speechless. "Thanks, Dad, for showing me how poor we are."

Leviticus 23:39-44

Now, the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the produce of the land, you shall keep the festival of the LORD, lasting seven days; a complete rest on the first day, and a complete rest on the eighth day. 40On the first day you shall take the fruit of majestic trees, branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God for seven days. You shall keep it as a festival to the LORD seven days in the year; you shall keep it in the seventh month as a statute forever throughout your generations. You shall live in booths for seven days; all that are citizens in Israel shall live in booths, so that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God. Thus Moses declared to the people of Israel the appointed festivals of the LORD.

Deuteronomy 16

You shall count seven weeks; begin to count the seven weeks from the time the sickle is first put to the standing grain. 10Then you shall keep the festival of weeks for the LORD your God, contributing a freewill offering in proportion to the blessing that you have received from the LORD your God. Rejoice before the LORD your God—you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, the Levites resident in your towns, as well as the strangers, the orphans, and the widows who are among you—at the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and diligently observe these statutes. You shall keep the festival of booths for seven days, when you have gathered in the produce from your threshing floor and your wine press. Rejoice during your festival, you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, as well as the Levites, the strangers, the orphans, and the widows resident in your towns. Seven days you shall keep the festival for the LORD your God at the place that the LORD will choose; for the LORD your God will bless you in all your produce and in all your undertakings, and you shall surely celebrate. Three times a year all your males shall appear before the LORD your God at the place that he will choose: at the festival of unleavened bread, at the festival of weeks, and at the festival of booths. They shall not appear before the LORD empty-handed; all shall give as they are able, according to the blessing of the LORD your God that he has given you.