

Ecclesiastes 11:1-6
John 4:31-38

Together, each week, WE RECALL:

It is necessary for us as Christians to pray every day, to study some portion of the Scriptures each day, seeking in grace and praise to discover God's will for our own lives on a daily basis. As part of our discipleship, we also work to increase our love for one another. We move earnestly toward tithing to "our" church, that the Kingdom may increase its resources. For the same reason we try to tithe our time and our conversation. Finally, we hope that our faith and love and discipline will increase until it flows beyond our fellowship and becomes a blessing to others.

TITHING YOUR CONVERSATION

As you all know, today is Stewardship Sunday.

Well, that woke up a few of you. Some of you didn't know? Stewardship is every day, or it is not stewardship. So today has to be Stewardship Sunday, and tomorrow is Stewardship Monday, and so on. By the way, tithing means ten percent, not three percent or five percent. Stewardship is a way of life – an effort to practice all our affairs in a manner we think will be pleasing to God, and in a way we hope will be beneficial to God's Kingdom, both now and in the future.

However, this congregation has surprised me again – very pleasantly, to be sure. I do not want to go into any details because that is for our Annual Meeting, but many of you have been wonderfully generous. I even suspect that we now have a contingent of tithers in our midst. That is making a huge difference. The truth is that as a church, we are far below the Christian minimal standard, but far above the normal performance of American mainline churches. I mention this because I am *not* asking for more money. I am *not* suggesting that you reconsider your pledge for the coming year. This sermon is *not* about tithing money. It is about tithing time and conversation. You did hear that, didn't you? This sermon is not about money. It is about something far more important. It is about tithing time and conversation.

TITHING YOUR CONVERSATION

Some of you will not believe me at first, but tithing time and conversation is far more difficult than tithing money. Tithing money is really one of the easier disciplines of the Christian Life. That is, it merely takes one clear and earnest decision. You decide to give ten percent of all spendable income to God, and to live on the rest. Money, like math, is fairly clear-cut. You may add things up a couple of times to make sure you get it right, but there it is: clear, confirmable. God gets ten percent, or God does not get ten percent. And once you set the pattern in motion and build your budget, there it is. You have to work it, but it basically runs itself after a while – runs the way you set it up – and all it requires is the time it takes to write a check once or twice a month.

Time and conversation are not nearly as simple or clear-cut. For several years, we have been reading this little ditty (We Recall) together about some of the basic disciplines of the Christian Life. Among other things, it mentions: “For the same reason, we try to tithe our time and our conversation.” For some people, the word “try” is a cop-out. But there is no coercion in this church. When it comes to the Christian Life, any of us can cop out any time we wish, if that is our aim. So the word “try” is just humility in the face of tasks that seem beautiful but are often more than we can handle or more complex than we can fathom. We really do mean to try, and to learn and grow and get better at it as we go.

I did not want to make the sermon title too long, but the subject today is tithing both time and conversation. Time is our most precious commodity, and it is in shorter supply than any other resource on earth. The way people use their time is an even clearer indication of what they truly value than the way they spend their money. Time, at least while we are alive, is the only way in which we are created equal. We all have twenty-four hours in each day. Some of us try with might and mané to ignore or change that. Some of us are always looking for new ways to get more done faster. Some of us even get so busy saving time that we have no time for God or prayer – a very dubious benefit, to be sure. Nevertheless, while we all worry about running out of money, influence, friendship, and many other things – when we run out of time, the game here is over. No chance to recoup, make amends, try again, do it differently – at least not in this realm. Time is our most precious commodity, and it is in shorter supply than any other resource on earth. Therefore, when we give “time” to a person or to a purpose, it is the most precious gift we can give.

I.) “Tithing time” is a symbolic phrase we use to remind us of the principle of conscientiously and intentionally giving some of our time to God. For most of us, this includes giving time to the Christian church and its purposes. Actually, God requires one-seventh of our time, not one-tenth. It is one of the Ten Commandments, for those of you who know them: “*Remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy.*” One day out of seven belongs to God. None of us, not one single one of us, attempts to obey this commandment in the way our forebears thought they were supposed to. But some of us still remember the precept, and know we want to devote a portion of our time to specifically trying to serve the Kingdom in special ways. Naturally, we want our *entire* lives to be devoted to Christ. Everything we do is in God’s presence – everything we do for family or friends or community, and everything we do for work or school or recreation. Everything is part of the Christian Path and Way. So we do not want to spend any time or money in ways that God would not approve. And some of what we do in the so-called secular world is doubtless more important to the Kingdom than things we do that we think are directly serving the Kingdom. Nevertheless, humans have learned, over countless generations, that those who do not set apart special ways to honor and serve that which they care about most soon lose such things altogether. Those who do not do so in marriage are divorced. Those who do not do so in religion have no faith family and do little or nothing to preserve or enhance whatever it is they believe. Isolated spirituality is just a vague illusion maintained to hide the reality of how little some people really care about God. Spirituality without religion – that is, without a faith community and without a discipline that we practice – is a mirage.

In any case, time is our most precious gift. Those of us who believe in and wish to live the Christian Life do budget our time at least as seriously as we budget our finances. And one-tenth or one-seventh of it we set aside specifically to honor, praise, and serve Christ’s Kingdom on earth. Some of you have done it for years without thinking about it in this particular vein. But if it is not intentional, it tends to get haphazard. I had a friend some years back who agreed to serve on one of the Conference committees of our denomination. It cost him a whole Saturday every three months and sometimes the Friday night before. One day, he came complaining to me that the committee wasted a lot of his time and he wasn’t sure he was accomplishing anything. (You know, not like watching television or going to the movies.) In this case I happened to know from other sources that he was making a dramatic impact on the committee, and that some of the “wasted time” was the committee

trying to come to terms with his perspective. I said to him, “What you need to do is pick two or three people on the committee and invite them to lunch, and see if a more casual conversation gives them a clearer grasp of what you are hoping to accomplish. Then maybe instead of feeling like the lone voice, there would be two or three voices speaking for the different approach. As a rule of thumb: One voice cries in the wilderness. Two voices are a movement. Three voices often win the day.”

He said, “I’m resenting the time I already spend, and you want me to spend even more time?” I said, “I understand the concern and the need for evaluation at least as much as you do. But why the resentment? I read your covenant. This is time you gave to God after prayerful consideration. What is to resent? If no good comes of it, God is the loser, and God still appreciates your gift as much as if it had changed the whole world. What’s to resent? It’s God’s time – no skin off your nose.” I won’t tell you what he said back to me then, but afterward he smiled. And he did take some people to lunch. And he ended up loving that committee.

There are endless ways to devote time in the hope of furthering God’s Kingdom. Some people need to devote most of their time-tithe to personal intake for a while: services, classes, retreats, workshops, finding a Mentor, personal reading and study and prayer. We are not all in the same “place,” and I do not want to describe here even the major patterns. If you are willing and want to tithe your time, the pattern that fits your situation will come clear with thoughtful prayer. But ideally, most of us want to end up about fifty-fifty with our time-tithe: fifty percent of it filling us and making us stronger in faith and peace and love, and fifty percent of it spent in our trying to strengthen the church and help it to be more effective. Of course, you do have to come up with your own definition of what is really your church.

II.) Tithing our conversation is applying all these same motives and desires and principles to the conversations we have. This is a very tough discipline. This is the most neglected of all the outer disciplines of the Christian Life among mainline Protestants. Very few of you tithe your conversation. The most obvious evidence, though not at all the most important evidence, is that there is room to sit down in here. Most of you are not talking about your faith to very many people very often. You think faith is a private affair, though everything in the New Testament insists that you carry it to others; that you bear witness to God’s love

in Jesus Christ; that you let people know that there are alternatives to loneliness and fear; that you make promises in the name of the Holy Spirit, knowing the Holy Spirit will come through on them.

Let's back up. It is commonly known now – I think – that an eating addiction is far more difficult to deal with than alcohol addiction. An alcohol addiction is very clear and straightforward. The solution is to stop taking the medicine. Obviously, for some people this is not easy, but it is very clear and simple. You drink or you do not. One drink and you are back into the pattern. No drinks and you are sober. It is a real miracle: no drinks and you never get drunk, and all the terrible, unsolvable problems that come from drinking too much go away. Simple, clear, no exceptions. Eating disorders are not like that. You can stop drinking but you cannot stop eating. Every meal raises the issues all over again. Every meal is a new battle for those with eating disorders. And the battle has endless dimensions: what to eat, how much, what about good nutrition, and on and on. It is enormously difficult to stay in a strong and mature mood and maintain a good attitude every time you eat – day after day, month after month. And it never lets up.

Forgive my backward analogy, but the discipline of *tithing money* is like alcohol addiction. You do it or you do not. Making the decision is not easy, but once you do, it is clear and simple. And after a while it is a way of life, you love it, and the inner warfare goes away. *Tithing conversation* is like a food addiction. It takes constant awareness. It is never simple. You never know for sure when to open your mouth and when to keep it shut – what to say and what not to say. Every day is its own challenge all over again, and no day ever leaves you alone. If we are, in the language of Second Corinthians (fifth chapter), “Ambassadors for Christ,” it may be huge joy at times – and sometimes, beyond human language to describe it, we may be grateful for what happens – but it is rigorous, unending discipline that never leaves us alone and that we never do “right,” at least not with any certainty.

Most of you have known or encountered some overeater evangelists. That is, they do not *tithe* their conversation; you get the whole carload every time you see them. They blurt out their formulas and phrases on any and all occasions, to any and every person they meet. They seem to have only one subject on their minds, and no genuine conversation with them is possible. In the language of our analogy, they are obese. On the other end of the spectrum, where most of *you* are, there are the evangelists who never bring up the subject – never *ever* say anything

about their faith or their relationship with Jesus – unless there is an extreme crisis. In the language of our analogy, they are anorexic. They think they look fine, but they are so skinny you can hardly see them – or in this case, hear them. Never speaking of their faith, they are on the verge of losing it altogether. The analogy is easily carried further, but you get the point.

Clearly, getting and staying where we belong on this spectrum is no easy task, and it requires constant awareness, discipline, discernment, and prayer. I did not say or imply that it is not worth it; we simply need to know what we are up against. Tithing your conversation is one of the most rigorous and, concurrently, one of the most valuable of all the disciplines of the Christian Life.

Now we need to be sure we are on the same subject. There are lots of things to consider when we think about the way we speak and what we say. *“What man is there who desires life, and covets many days, that he may enjoy good? Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit. Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it.”* (Psalm 34:12-14) Who can read such a passage without remembering that the tongue can cause enormous trouble, and that it often seems untamed and ill-mannered no matter how much we scold it. The point is reiterated in the Book of James: *“And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is an unrighteous world among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the cycle of nature, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by humankind, but no human being can tame the tongue – a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”* (James 3:6-8) I grew up a Quaker, where silence was considered golden: a thing so precious that a person should think long and hard before ruining it. (Obviously I have departed from my upbringing.) “Restraint of tongue and pen” is a principle found on nearly every spiritual path, in one guise or another.

Lots of Congregationalists have tried to substitute good manners for faith and to substitute cordial conversation for evangelism. That is probably why the United Church of Christ has been dying across our land for the last three generations. None of this is our subject today. Tithing your conversation is not about your vocabulary. It is not about eliminating cusswords from your speech. It is not about being polite, refraining from gossip, telling the truth, giving people compliments, or trying to reconcile people who are angry toward each other.

These are concerns, but they are not our concerns today. Tithing your conversation is about *what* you talk about, how often, and with whom. Specifically, it is about how much you talk about your faith – your relationship to Jesus, or to God. How often do you speak about your prayer life? Your hope for eternal life? The inner encounters you have with the Holy Spirit? The ways God has changed, and is changing, your life? How often do you tell people who you sense need it or who might be interested (there is a big difference) that Jesus loves them? That God has special plans for their lives? That the Holy Spirit is eager for conversation with them? How often, from normal conversations, do you pick up threads or themes that invite you to mention biblical stories or principles? The life of your faith community? The sheer awareness that we are more than physical creatures, and that our destiny goes far beyond anything seen or known in this world?

I think it was John Knox who said, “Strange world in which it is wisdom to export automobiles and guns, but we shove religion down people’s throats to speak of a power that conquers sin and death.” As the old saying goes: “Silence isn’t always golden – sometimes it’s just yellow.”

Some of you find it small trouble to speak of sports or movies, of clothes or current events, of your children or a book you read or a restaurant you liked. Nobody wants to stop that, or at least I sure don’t. But what about tithing your conversation? How many words do you speak each day? A few of you are silent types and probably only get out about 3,000 words each day. Most of you come closer to 50,000. Some of you, way beyond that. Let’s be very conservative and cut it in half. Suppose you speak a reasonable 25,000 words in a normal day. That means you owe the Lord about the equivalent of one of my sermons in conversation about your faith every day. You don’t have to make it all at one time; you don’t have to give an overdose like I do. I’m just trying to give you a hint at the impact this congregation would have if its people began to tithe their conversation.

And I really do not suggest that you take a legalistic approach and start counting the words you speak. But imagine the results if each of you began to consciously devote about a tenth of your conversation to speaking about the Lord, the Kingdom, prayer, the Holy Spirit, your own spiritual experiences, the deeper meanings and purposes of Life.

TITHING YOUR CONVERSATION

If you tithe your conversation, this church will grow more and deeper in the coming year than it ever has before in its history. And not because you try to make that happen. In fact, trying to *make* something happen will ruin it. You do not have to produce any results. You do not have to provide the power or create other people's interest. All of that is already taken care of by the Creator. We are all created with a divine spark within us. The hunger to know God is always there – part of our design. You do not have to pretend, produce, or instill it in anybody. They come with it. It is built within them, just like it is within you. You have only to speak to it, connect with it, let it be known that you are willing to talk about it.

If you start tithing your conversation, the Lord will take care of who listens, who responds, and in what fashion. We sow the seeds; we do not gather the harvest. Some people will listen and respond. That is a promise. If you start getting the words out – however haltingly, from your perspective – the response will eventually come. Some of the people you speak to will be blessed.

I am suggesting that each and every one of you could decide to tithe your conversation. It is no substitute for tithing your money; in fact, it is *harder* than tithing your money. It is also more exciting, more important, and of greater value to the Kingdom. Of course, it would also get us into a lot more trouble and give us a lot more problems. But they are the troubles we need and the problems we want. Besides, you don't really want to spend your whole life in silence about the very subject you care about most, love most, have the most gratitude for ... do you?