

Love Offerings©**2 Corinthians 9:6-10; Mark 12:38-44****November 8, 2015****Dr. Sharlyn DeHaven Gates**

Today is a very special day on our church calendar. This is the day when we offer our pledge cards with our stewardship commitments so they can be dedicated to God.

When our children were growing up and they were told to do something, like clean their rooms or eat their vegetables, they often would cry, "Do I *have* to?" Fred's response was, "No, you don't *have* to. You *get* too!" (I have to admit that didn't really change their attitude too much.)

But, I think that goes very well with our stewardship pledge Sunday. You don't have to make a pledge of how much you plan on giving next year, or how you intend on using your time and talents to serve the church. You don't *have* to. But you *get* to!

We have this blessed opportunity each year to say, "I love you, Lord, and I trust you" by writing down a commitment and having it dedicated – consecrated – to God.

It's a great opportunity to join your brothers and sisters in this church family and joyfully say I'm giving back a portion of what God has blessed me with by supporting the ministry and mission of Jesus Christ through my church.

I am a strong believer in the spiritual discipline of tithing – that is giving a percentage of your income back to God. I personally have experienced great blessings through this practice. It isn't easy to do, but it builds trust and dependence on God.

Tithing comes from the Old Testament where people would give the first 10% of their livelihood back to God – a harvest of grain, or the first growth of livestock. It would be brought to the temple and dedicated to God in thanksgiving for all the Lord had done for them throughout the year.

Those offerings supported the ministry of the running the temple – it provided a way for the priests to be fed and to be able to do ministry and it made it possible to help the poor.

There are many spiritual benefits from tithing. As I said, it can build a dependence and strong trust in God simply because sometimes you aren't sure if you can live off of what is left after giving that percentage. Yet, somehow God always provides a way.

Making a commitment to tithing takes away that wrestling and trying to decide what you will give in a particular pay period. You already made that decision, and automatically do it.

But that is also a bit of a problem, I think. Because when it becomes automatic – it can also become rote. You just do it without thinking about it, without having that joy in giving – that cheerfulness that Paul talks about in his second letter to the Corinthians.

I suspect that is why we don't hear much about tithing in the New Testament. Jesus preaches love. In Matthew he talks about the heart. Where your heart is - that is also where you find your treasure. Are you storing up the things that matter, or are you hoarding things that won't matter one little whit when your life ends?

Paul talks a lot about giving generously, and giving what you have determined God is leading you to give. And that giving with joy and gratitude is most important. When you give, give from a place of love and thanksgiving. Who knows, you may decide to give a whole lot more than 10% because of how thankful you are!

Of course, there are a zillion really good organizations we can give to – World Vision, The Wish Foundation, Unicef, Salvation Army, Bread for the World – the list is long and for the most part, all those organizations are wonderful in helping the poor, the sick, the disabled, the homeless, etc. Maybe you do give to some of those organizations, and that's great!

So, why give to the church? I have heard many people say that while they think it is good to support mission work in other countries, they believe it is very important to give here at home in our community and our own country.

Like I said, there are so many different organizations to give to that it can be difficult to decide which ones should take priority. But when you give to the church, you are actually supporting many different mission and ministry opportunities!

Through our offerings and our ministry, we give a portion of what we, as the church receive, to support the general mission of the Presbyterian Church, USA. Those mission funds support many world mission opportunities, as well as providing resources for our congregations.

When we give to the church, we are providing a way to support the mission and outreach of our congregation. If it weren't for your offerings, we would not be able to have resources for Christian education, which is so vital for growing in the faith.

If it weren't for your offerings, we would not have the ability to have music, or hymnals, or special resources for worship. In fact, we would not have a sanctuary or a building to worship and fellowship together in.

When you give to the church where you are member, you are supporting your own family. You are making it possible to have what you need as a part of the family of faith.

You receive comfort and care and love and prayers. You have fellowship and fun – brothers and sisters who laugh with you and cry with you. You have a family who celebrates those many milestones in your life with you – births, baptisms, confirmation, weddings and funerals.

You have the opportunity to join together and make a difference in the community we live in through the ministries of this church – ministries like the Baby Pantry that serves so many families who work several jobs yet have such a struggle to make ends meet.

And you also have the opportunity to add whatever amount you can give – whether it be small or large – to the ministry of the larger church that supports disaster assistance and world hunger; that helps the homeless, the refugees, the sick and the oppressed. I can't think of a better place to give my offerings really. I can't imagine a place where giving my time and using the talents God has given me could be better, used or where I would receive so many blessings in return.

We give to support what happens inside these walls – the people worshipping and growing in faith; and outside these walls – reaching out to the community, and even across the ocean to other parts of the world.

But, why do we have to fill out a pledge card? Well, of course, you don't *have* to – but you *get* to! I have no idea who fills out a card and who doesn't. Even if you bring your card up here to the front as an act of faithful dedication, I am not paying attention to who has a card and who doesn't. Even if I see it, believe me, my memory isn't that great!

I certainly don't know how much anyone pledges or gives. That information is as confidential as it can possibly be with only a very limited amount of trusted people who prepare the budget and who send you your statements.

The budget is one of the main reasons why it's good to fill out a pledge card. If we didn't use pledge cards, it would be a real guessing game for the ministry teams as they planned their work for the coming year.

They would have no idea how much they would have to be able to order current resources and to provide the best opportunities for learning, worshipping, growing, for caring for our building, and so on. It is also helpful for our teams to see who might be willing – by what was stated as a talent – to serve with them in ministry.

But, just as important as being able to plan a budget, is the blessing we each receive as we fill out that pledge card and offer it to be dedicated to God's service. I think of it as making a covenant with God – writing down something important – a commitment that I am promising to keep. There is something very meaningful in doing that, at least I find it to be that way.

Of course, we know that sometimes life happens and we discover that what we thought we could do now is not possible. Please know that you are never judged if you have to change your pledge. It is helpful to know if you can't make it so we can adjust accordingly. All you need is to tell one person – myself or Pastor Shaun or our treasurer. It is always okay if that happens and always kept confidential.

And, while I do not know who pledges, I am aware that some people don't, for whatever reason they feel is important. Please know that your offerings are just as valued as those that have been pledged.

So, you can give in whatever way you feel God is leading you. Whether it be a percentage of your income, or a specific amount you have decided on through prayer; whether you write it down, or just write on your heart and mind what you will give, but really prefer not to pledge – it is all appreciated and valued. It is all done out of love and thanksgiving.

When we think about that widow in our text today, how she gave her last two pennies, we wonder why she would do such a thing. Those who gave large amounts gave out of their abundance. Those large amounts were surely appreciated, as they are today.

But even the smallest amount is just as important. When we give out of gratitude for what God has given to us; when we give with thanksgiving filling our hearts for the many blessings we have – we are giving from that deep place of trust and love.

When we give with love we can't help but be a cheerful giver, as Paul told the Corinthians to be. Whatever you do and whatever you give, give it as a love offering. For Jesus said the greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your strength, with all your mind, and to love others as you love yourself.

Loving God is truly what stewardship is about. Thanks be to God for giving us that opportunity to give – not because we *have* to, but because we *get* to!