

## HARVEST BLESSINGS

*<sup>6</sup>For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished. <sup>7</sup> Ever since the days of your ancestors you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. But you say, "How shall we return?" <sup>8</sup>Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, "How are we robbing you?" In your tithes and offerings! <sup>9</sup>You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me--the whole nation of you! <sup>10</sup>Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing. <sup>11</sup>I will rebuke the locust for you, so that it will not destroy the produce of your soil; and your vine in the field shall not be barren, says the LORD of hosts. <sup>12</sup>Then all nations will count you happy, for you will be a land of delight, says the LORD of hosts.*

(Malachi 3:6-12, NRSV)

It is no secret that with rising oil prices a dollar doesn't buy what it used to. Yogi Berra knew this truth when he quipped, "A nickel ain't worth a dime anymore" (<http://www.luthersem.edu/stewardship/database>).

Today is Stewardship Sunday and hopefully you'll feel inspired to think about more than nickels and dimes. Ministers are frequently asked about the problem of evil in the world, the causes of suffering and pain. No one has ever asked me to explain the existence of good in the world (Ibid). Why is there hope in the face of despair? Why is there goodness in the face of evil? Why is there forgiveness in the

face of injury? Why is there generosity in the face of poverty?

I can only think of two reasons and both can be found in this sanctuary—God and us. While God is present with us every moment of every day it is good to come to this place to pray, to sing, to listen, and to remember God’s goodness and presence. Doing so can inspire us to do good. The second reason for good in the world can be found as we look at the people seated around us. You and I and the choices we make directly influence how much love, kindness, and compassion exists in the world. Our choice to be here in church today increases the likelihood of more love in the world, as our lives become conduits of grace and channels of love. The choices we make about stewardship, about how much we will give to God’s work in this place also determine how much love and hope there’ll be in the world. Our church’s effectiveness in carrying out God’s mission is directly proportionate to the amount of money and time we give.

This has always been true, even in ancient times. Today’s scripture lesson from the Old Testament book of Malachi underscores the importance of contributing to God’s work. Set in the first half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C., the book of Malachi covers a troubled time in the history of Judah, the southern kingdom. As a prophet, Malachi had his hands full. As is too often the case, there were problems with the clergy. The priests violated laws regulating ritual sacrifice and were lax in teaching the people the way of God. The results were dismal. People stopped giving to support God’s work. The unique identity of the religious community declined. And the day laborers, immigrants, widows, and orphans suffered oppression (*Harper’s Bible Commentary*, James L. Mays editor, p. 753).

Does this mean that the people would be cut off from God forever? No. The answer was simple. God said, “Return to me and I will return to you.” In this passage

God's concern is with the people's lack of faithfulness in sharing their money and possessions. God accuses the people of robbery because they've failed to give their tithes and offerings. However, instead of extending the rod of punishment, God extends an olive branch with the words, "Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test...see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing" (Malachi 3:10).

God's answer then remains the same today—give and you will be blessed. There's no doubt that the health and wealth preachers and televangelists have distorted this message. The promise of God's blessing doesn't mean more cash in the bank for the giver. If so, God would be like an investment with a guaranteed rate of return. Instead the promised blessings are of much greater significance. God's blessings are spiritual and thus eternal. What a blessing to know that our contributions to God's work through this church changes lives for the better. The amount of love in our world grows and it grows in our own hearts and souls. Growing love and changing lives—could we dream of better blessings than these?

And yet we know these dreams only happen if all of us do our part, if we make a commitment of money and time to God through our church. Like so many of you, my wife, Colleen, and I pledge and give financially to our church. Recently I thought, if everyone gave to the church the amount we give, would our church be better or worse off? It's a tricky question. Perhaps we should remember Jesus' parable of the widow's mite. The amount she gave seemed insignificant to the casual onlooker. However, Jesus knew that her sacrifice in giving was significant.

As someone said, "Not equal gifts but equal sacrifice." The Old Testament concept of tithing relates to

this quote. God did not tell all the Israelites to give the same amount. Rather God said that they were to give the same percentage, ten percent of their yearly income. For the merchants this meant money. For others it meant ten percent of their harvest or flocks. The tithe went to the temple for two main purposes—to maintain the temple and its priests and to alleviate the suffering of those in need.

It's interesting how the money we give our church accomplishes the same purposes. We choose the percentage of our pledge that goes to operating expenses from paying the electric bill to paying the employees. We also choose a percentage of our pledge to be used through our Board of Missions and Outreach to help people in need.

Growing up in a Baptist church I was taught that tithing ten percent of my income to the church was not the goal, instead ten percent was the starting point. Don't worry, I'm not going to lay on the guilt and tell you that God's angry because not everyone in our church gives ten percent of his or her income. While Jesus never disputed the concept of tithing, he was also not legalistic about calculating amounts. His attitude was give and give freely without counting the cost.

At the end of the day it is not how much we make that matters, it is how much we give. How much do we spend on ourselves and how much do we spend on others? How much money do we spend on expensive cars and vacations, costly restaurants and clothes versus giving to those in need, including the church? That's not a question I am particularly comfortable asking and it's not a question I'm particularly comfortable answering either. For I know that there's so much more I could do.

As we begin this new program year let us examine our hearts and our priorities, how we spend our time and

how we spend our money. The beauty of our church is that when we contribute we not only see the tangible results all around us, but there are results we will never see. Harry Emerson Fosdick once said, “Money is a miraculous thing. It is your personal energy reduced to a portable form and endowed with power you yourself do not possess. It can go where you cannot go; speak languages you cannot speak; lift burdens you cannot touch with your fingers; save lives with which you cannot deal directly”

<http://www.luthersem.edu/stewardship/database>. Not only does money have this power, but giving our time does as well.

Through the prophet Malachi God said, “Bring the full tithe into the storehouse...and see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.” If we generously share our time and our money for God’s work in this place it’s like planting seeds of faith in anticipation of a harvest of blessings. What blessings might we hope to harvest this year? The blessing of children learning that God loves them and they are of infinite worth. The blessing of learning the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm and years later finding strength in remembering that even though we walk in the valley of the shadow of death, that God is always with us. The blessing of teenagers who on a PF Mission Trip discover the joy of serving others and eventually choose a helping profession in college. Or the teenagers who one day make it big on Wall Street and remember those Sunday afternoons at the Saratoga Family Inn to which they write a big check and bring their own children to help. The blessing of adults who come to worship weighed down with the burdens of life and who leave this sacred place with a literal song in their hearts thanks to our choir and soloists. The blessing of people who’ve experienced healing as a result of our Prayer Chain. The blessing of people who’ve lost purpose in their lives and found it again by helping build a Habitat for Humanity House or volunteering to help the children at Adventures in

Learning. The blessing of grieving people who found comfort here during a funeral and support through our New Horizons group. The blessing of an addiction free life experienced by those who come every week to our AA meetings. The blessing of feeding children in an orphanage in Kenya. The blessing of seeing our resources used to help rebuild the lives of recent hurricane victims. The blessing of knowing that every week people come to this place to pray, to commune with God, and to find hope. What a harvest of blessings we see from our support of the work of God in this place.

Why is there hope in the face of despair? Why is there goodness in the face of evil? Why is there forgiveness in the face of injury? Why is there generosity in the face of poverty? Because of God and people like you and me. It's said that a turtle never gets anywhere unless it sticks out its neck (Ibid.). Let's stick our necks out a little further this year and see where God will take us. AMEN.

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## **PASTORAL PRAYER**

Eternal God, we thank you for all of life's blessings, friends and family and a place to worship. You have given us so much and we ask your help in learning how to give back. The needs of the world are great, but our resources are great too. Challenge us to use all that we have and all that we are to make a lasting difference in the world. Give our church wisdom as we seek to dream big dreams and see new visions for our mission in this community and throughout the world. Open our minds, our hearts, and our hands that we might do more and do it to your glory. Through Jesus Christ we pray. AMEN.