

Malachi 3:10

October 22, 2017

“Relate to the Plate”

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church

20th Sunday af. Pentecost (Proper 24)

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Grace, Mercy, and Peace be unto you from Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior and God our Heavenly Father. Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

[Introduction]

The sermon is done and here comes the plate—the offering plate!

And some begin to think...

Shall I leave a tip . . . to fulfill my obligation to God for his care?

Some of my guilt goes away when I give; I'll feel less guilty.

Or, shall I leave the price of admission?

Surely it costs something to put on the Sunday service.

I'm a member; I'll give my dues as a good member.

Or, I'll give “for services rendered.”

After all, someday I'll need those services: Baptism, wedding, funeral.

Now think about... Picture all the blessings God gives you:

food, clothing, home, land,

money, goods, a devout spouse, devout children,

good weather, peace, health, good friends, faithful neighbors,

and the like.

Picture God giving those blessings to you wrapped in bags of gold.

And imagine that with each of these blessings God gives you,

he likes to divide the blessing into in a collection of ten golden bags

—each blessing divided up into ten portions and wrapped in ten bags of gold.

[Note: 10 bags removed]

God gives you ten golden bags of groceries.

God gives you ten golden bags of clothing;

ten golden bags of money;

ten golden bags of good weather;

ten golden bags of peace;

ten golden bags of good health; and the like.

The question that the prophet Malachi sets before us today is

“How do those ten bags of gold relate to the plate?”

Those hit-and-miss reasons—leaving a tip, feeling less guilty, the price of admission, dues, for services rendered—they all miss the point of how you relate to the plate.

Through the prophet Malachi, God says,

“Bring the full tithe 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 a blessing until there is no more need” (3:10).

[*Hard Hearts*]

Okay, let’s recognize that the offerings you put in the plate are not between you and the plate.

The tithes, or offerings, Malachi wrote about
were given to God in his house, the temple.

Thus all offerings brought to the temple and all the offerings you put in the plate
are given to God.

Yet, for the sake of this message today,
and because the offering plate is passed to you,
we’ll speak of how ten bags of gold relate to the plate.

Now in the prophet Malachi’s time,
it had been about eighty years since the Israelites returned from captivity in
Babylon.

The grandchildren and great-grandchildren now were working the soil and eating
of the good of the land. But some drastic changes had come with the new
generations.

They had fallen back into the same sins that had led to the fall of their great nation
to the Babylonian army. They were bringing crippled sacrifices to offer to God.

Some were saying it was so tiresome to bring an offering to God.
Some promised good offerings, but the offerings they brought were flawed.
Finally, God declared that they were stealing from him in the offerings they
brought.

God gave the Israelites in the Old Testament several laws

about the offerings they were to bring to the temple.

The law referred to in our text is the law about the tithe.

The Israelites had an agricultural society,
so the tithe offering was stated in Lev 27:30:

“Every tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the trees, is the LORD’s; it is holy to the LORD.”

Simply stated, the people were to bring an offering of 10 percent of the family’s increase in goods.

Another important offering the Israelites brought to the temple was the offering of the firstfruits. Ex 23:19: ***“The best of the firstfruits of your ground you shall bring into the house of the LORD your God.”***

As they began to harvest their grain, and
as they began picking fruit from the trees, they were to bring the first of those fruits.

And they were to bring “the best,”
that is, grain with no spoilage and fruit that was juicy and ripe
—the best for the Lord.

In the prophet Malachi’s day, the people again were having heart trouble, the kind of heart trouble the prophet Ezekiel had described two centuries earlier: hearts of stone when they should have had hearts of flesh (11:19).

A heart of stone is a hardened heart.

A heart of stone shows no signs of life.

A heart of stone leads a person to serve themselves and their needs.

A heart of stone does not want to listen to God’s Word.

The same is true today.

We have some of the same heart trouble people had in Malachi’s time:
hearts of stone that don’t want to listen to what God says in his Word.

[To Tithe]

We who live after Jesus offered himself for us on the cross
and was raised for our salvation no longer have a law from God
that we must put 10 percent into the offering plate,
nor that we must bring the first of everything we harvest.

However, the Old Testament law of bringing the offering of the tithe and the offering of the firstfruits can be a good guide for us Christians.

A third use of the law...

Think about it... Think about how much more richly blessed we are than were those Old Testament believers—and I'm not talking about the air-conditioning, satellite TV, and indoor plumbing they never dreamed of.

They lived every day by the promise that the Messiah would come someday, but *when* they didn't know.

We live knowing Jesus *did* come, that he *did* fulfill God's Law for us.

We live knowing

that on the cross Jesus *did* suffer the punishment of hell so that we never will,

that he *has* fully and completely accomplished our salvation so

that we absolutely *will* live in the limitless joys and riches of heaven

with him forever.

What's more, specifically because Jesus' death on the cross has reconciled us to God, removing the sin that separated us from him, that would have cut us off from every blessing, God has now given us everything we have and everything we truly need: food, clothing, home, land, money, good weather, peace, health, and the like.

Today we picture God giving us all those gifts in ten bags of gold.

Those ten bags of gold relate to the plate as a firstfruit offering.

The first action a family does with those ten bags of gold is to give to God first.

The family does that first, before making any purchases, before paying any bills.

The first portion goes to God as a firstfruit thank offering.

The ten bags of gold also can relate to the plate as a tithe, 10 percent of everything God gives.

[Note: 1 bag returned]

That means out of every group of ten bags of gold God gives, one bag is placed in the plate.

In our cash economy, that means we determine, we work out, what the 10 percent is and write that check first.

When you place that check in the offering plate,
picture it as the first bag of gold out of every ten bags of gold God gives to you.

And, remember, look for God in the offering plate, because he's the one with whom you're relating with a firstfruit offering and with an offering of a tithe.

The remaining nine bags of gold are for the family to use for savings and for living.

[*New Hearts*]

The devil and the world around us set in front of us many temptations
about the ten bags of gold God gives us.

We see how the world uses all the blessings that come from God's hand.
"I worked hard for it; it's mine. I can do with it whatever I want."

We are tempted to think the same way.
Some people use all ten bags of golden blessings only for themselves.
They serve themselves, without a thought of God.

The temptations to serve ourselves work on us when our hearts are hearts of stone.
Hardened hearts tend not to listen to God's Word.

So God does his surgery on hearts of stone. God promised: "***I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh***" (Ezek 11:19).

God preps us for surgery by washing us clean in the water of Holy Baptism.
That is water combined with God's Word.

Thus it has the power to work forgiveness of sin
and to rescue us from the devil and his temptations.

Jesus gave his heart for us; he gave his all for us on the cross.

Now in our Baptism, those blessings of forgiveness and salvation and eternal life are ours, and that very Baptism gives us new hearts to believe that.

The new heart of flesh God gives, replacing our heart of stone,
is fashioned after the heart of Jesus, a heart that does the will of the Father in heaven.

After God's heart surgery on us, we work at making the ten bags of golden blessings relate to the plate.

Our offerings flow as *thank* offerings, out of our renewed heart.

Following God's surgery comes the recovery—a lifelong recovery.

And the prescription for a strong recovery is
a regular dose of hearing, reading, and studying God's Word
and regular attendance at the Lord's Supper,
for where there is forgiveness of sins,
there is also life and salvation.

[Conclusion]

In our Malachi text, God says he will continuously pour blessings on his people from above.

And when you attend the Divine Service, the plate will keep coming to you.
And God's blessings will keep coming too.

Those ten bags of gold all relate to the plate.

We simply return to God some of what he gives me.

See God in the plate. That is how you relate to the plate. Amen.