



THE FOURTH POCKET OF STEWARDSHIP – TITHING



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Ruth 1: 10-18

Today is the last of a series of 4 sermons on stewardship. The first sermon was on our stewardship of creation, the second on our time and talents, the third on how we leave a legacy and the fourth is on tithing. Every sermon on stewardship culminates our of our relationship to God.

Today we will look at a scripture from the book of Ruth. As we know, it begins with the story of a woman named Naomi whose husband and sons have all died. Naomi has great concern for her daughter-in-laws and wants them to be able to find husbands to be their provision. Listen now to the scripture from Ruth:

Story of Ruth 1:10-18

But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me." Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

So Naomi said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." But Ruth said,

*"Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die—
there will I be buried.
May the LORD do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!"*

¹⁸ When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

The word of the Lord.

We know the end of the story. Ruth marries Boaz who becomes God's provision for Naomi and Ruth. Together, Ruth and Boaz become the great-grandparents of King David. King David is God's provision for the entire nation of Israel. This happens all through relationship. Relationship in the Old Testament was modeled best through the honoring of the commandments or Mitzvots.

Mitzvots were the Divine commandments contained in the Torah (or the first 5 books of the Bible). It is what the Halacha – or the Jewish law is based upon. There are estimated to be 613 commandments in the O.T.

By the 3rd century, Rabbi's were writing the Talmud or the personal and civil laws based on the Mitzvots. One of the Rabbi's whose writings we have is Rabbi Simlai.

Rabbi Simlai wrote in a sermon that 613 commandments were communicated to Moses – out of the 613, 365 were negative commands "thou shalt not", corresponding to the number of solar

days [in a year], and 248 positive commands, corresponding to the number of the bones of a man's body (according to what Rabbi Simlai knew in that day. According to Rabbi Simlai, a person should observe the Torah with all their body parts (248) every day (365). The two numbers add up to 613.

Rabbi Simlai said that all the mitzvot were to be understood as an attempt to bring justice and righteousness into the world and they are the way of truly seeking to be in relationship with God.

More recently, Rabbi Hertzel Fishman said that the purpose of observing any of the commandments is to improve ourselves, to make us better people, more caring, more loving, more concerned. The commandments are not magic, nor do they earn us rewards, but they are valuable for the way in which they improve our character and thereby benefit the society in which we live.

Why do I tell you all of this and what does it have to do with our giving? What I want you to hear is that following the commandments of God embeds us deeply in our relationship with God. As we live and move and have our being in God, what we are doing is essentially being the presence of God in our world.

Out of relationship with God, we understand that we serve a provisional God. A God who says not to worry for God feeds the sparrows and will likewise feed us. Just as God provided for Naomi and Ruth, King David and others, we worship the same God who will provide for each one of us and the ministry needs of The Presbyterian Church of Okemos.

What I preach is NOT a prosperity gospel. God is not a vending machine that you put your money in so that you can have even more money out. We cannot inspire God with our meager gifts. This kind of preaching makes me remember a much beloved Aunt whom I always referred to as my little Pentecostal Aunt. My Aunt Maxine was part of a church that she

supported on her social security and pension, but she also got involved with a television evangelist. Because of this evangelist's teaching, my Aunt stopped spending her money on her eye medication so that she would have money to send into this TV evangelist. As a result, my Aunt lived the balance of her life nearly blind.

What I do preach is a provisional God who provides for us in ways beyond our comprehension. God is a caretaking God and we, likewise, can become the hands of God as we give to help others.

I give as an act of worship. The offering that is collected as part of worship is an act of worship just as the reading of the liturgy, the reading of scriptures, the sermon and prayers – so is the offering. It is the time that we:

- surrender to God, knowing that everything we have belongs to God.
- we understand that everything in our lives (including our finances) are under God's provision.
- we learn that God calls us not only to support the church but to see with God's eyes those that may need the help that we can give them today.
- give our testimony. By giving we say that we believe that what we give can not only meet the needs of this community of faith but can extend the gospel beyond the walls of this church, including the support of our missions.
- give because it is our mandate to do so from God.

God calls us to give. Just as Boaz became the agent of God as provision for Naomi and Ruth and King David became the agent of God as provision for the nation of Israel, we too become the agents of God's provision for others.

As pastor I have experienced 3 ways that congregational members tend to give. (As a disclosure, I do not look at the

tithing records for this church, I have no idea of how anyone gives – these are ways in my past church experiences of how I see people give).

1. People do what I call *controlled giving*. The pastor knows of people who (if the furnace breaks, or the roof leaks or there is a very specific need that the person would approve of spending money on) give but they do not and will not tithe.
2. People do what I call *conditional giving*. If the church is going in the way it should go, if the pastor behaves, preaches and acts in approved ways – they give. But as soon as something happens – gone are the tithes. You have no idea how many times that pastors hear, “I am going to leave and take my tithe with me”. I always want to ask people to show me where in the bible that God said everything has to go my way or your way before we give.
3. Most people give out of a life that is deeply embedded in God and who understand that our giving to the church is giving to the ministry and the propagation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. John Wesley calls us the “means of grace” so that you and I become those channels of grace.

Today is Stewardship Sunday. It is a day that hopefully all of you have prayed about and asked God what should be your commitment to the future of the ministry of the gospel in this place. Hopefully, you all received the stewardship packet with the pledge card enclosed.

Today, I, along with the Stewardship Committee, are asking you to either bring your stewardship commitment card to the parking lot service and drop it in a box – or mail your commitment card to the church. Today we will bless these pledges and the work of the ministry of the gospel that each one of these commitment cards represent.

In the next few weeks, I hope that the stewardship committee will give a report on how many pledges came in.

In lieu of a special time for offering, we will take this time to celebrate together everything that God has done and is doing for each one of us individually and corporately as the church; it is a time where we recommit ourselves to God, to God's house and to the ministry of the gospel of Jesus Christ; it is a time for this community gather to honor God in all the ways that we do stewardship. Join me in the following responsive prayer:

Let's pray:

Holy God, Creator of all, the earth is yours,
the world and all who live in it.

**All: You have entrusted us with gifts—
time, talent, energy, money—
and asked us to use them to build your kingdom.
With thanks and praise we respond to your call.**

One: We bring these gifts you have given,
returning your generosity, paying it forward.

**All: We offer ourselves, our lives, our hopes and fears,
our dollars and our hours.**

**We commit ourselves to work for your world,
to love and serve wherever you call.**

One: We ask your blessing on this, your church,
as we seek to follow you with heart, mind, and soul.

**All: Bless also these gifts, our investment in your future,
that they may multiply in faith, hope, and love.**

Amen.