

## **Warning! I Will Be Teaching Your Teenagers to Tithe**

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Four teenagers and their adult advisors, including myself, huddled over a budget worksheet in Agua Prieta, Mexico, just across the border from Douglas, Arizona.

We were midway through our youth mission trip with Presbyterian Border Ministries, and we were learning about the economic realities that face our Christian brothers and sisters in that particular town. We had learned that migrants from Chiapas and Honduras and other points south come to Agua Prieta seeking an opportunity to provide a more stable living for themselves and their families. We had discovered that the patterns of economic migration are not unique to Agua Prieta or Mexico, but are in fact the stories of our own families' migrations throughout the centuries ... from Europe to the United States to various cities and towns across our own country.

On this day midway through our mission trip, we learned that we would be living on a maquila salary for the next 36 hours. The experience was designed to help us understand the economic realities of our Christian sisters and brothers in Agua Prieta. We gathered to discuss our most important budget priorities: Food, of course. Shelter, definitely. We figured we had enough clothing for 36 hours so we let that basic necessity go unbudgeted. But tithing. That was on the list of possible budget items. What would we do about tithing?

It was a concept that was new to our youth, so we explained it to them. In biblical tradition, when the Israelites lived in an agricultural economy, they were commanded to return the first tenth of their crops to the service of God. This "tithe"—meaning 10 percent—provided an income for the temple priests who had committed their lives to serve the people. The tithe also provided a pool of resources to care for those who did not have enough to cover their basic needs. Not so different from the pledges we make to our congregation. Some of us give ten percent, right off the top. Others of us give a different percentage every year. Others of us give a particular amount that reflects our prayerful response to the generosity of God.

Through the practice of giving back—whatever amount it might be—we, like the ancient Israelites, remember that everything we have produced through the sweat of our own labor is, in fact, a gift from God, even if we worked hard to earn it. And through the practice of giving back, we, like the ancient Israelites, share the fruits of our labor with those whose labor simply has not provided sufficiently for their needs, even if they have worked just as hard as those who have more.

On our mission trip in Agua Prieta, we visited Lily of the Valley Presbyterian Church, a congregation that continues the biblical practice of tithing to this day. Tithing is, in fact, a condition of membership in that congregation. If you join the church, you commit to tithe. So when the time came in the worship service to receive the morning offering, there were two different processions that came forward to the front of the sanctuary. In the first, members came forward to offer their tithe—ten percent of whatever income they had earned that week.

In the second, anyone who wished to give an additional offering—or participants in worship who were not official members of the congregation—came forward to present their gifts. Two processions—one to tithe, one to make an offering of love, both to

celebrate the goodness of a God who has offered us abundant life, who has commanded us to share that abundant life with everyone.

So there we were, four American teenagers and three American adults living on a Mexican maquila salary for 36 hours trying to decide whether or not to tithe. We did not think our maquila salary was very large. We had already decided that we could not afford to set aside any money for medical emergencies. (What could possibly happen in a day and a half?) And with four growing teenagers among us, we really, really, really wanted to have enough to eat!

But would we tithe?

It just so happens that one of the adult leaders and I are committed tithers. We had only just met, but we both spoke passionately in favor of the practice. In fact, the adult leader had just spoken in worship about her education in an Alaskan village where the natives return the first salmon of the season to the river as a token of gratitude for the providence of God. She had just spoken in worship of how her experience of tithing is an expression of her gratitude for having a job and her discipline of trusting that God will provide, even when times are difficult, just as God provided for the Israelites wandering in the wilderness on their way to a land of milk and honey.

We convinced our teenagers to tithe in Agua Prieta on that mission trip. Some of us agreed reluctantly, others of us agreed passionately. But in the end, we tithed.

And then we got sick. A lot really can happen in a day and a half! We had set aside money for the church, we had set aside money for food, we had set aside money for housing, but we had not set aside money for healthcare. And we got sick.

Guess who helped us? Lily of the Valley Presbyterian Church. The place we had just sent our tithe.

Our pastors took us to the doctor, and we got the medicine we needed. Our church family made us chicken soup—a cross cultural health care system for sure. Our leaders adapted the schedule for us, so we could rest. And we got better. And now it is all a distant memory.

But we tithed. On a maquila salary, we gave thanks and we gave back. And I would submit to you that the experience of giving to the church in that 36 hour period really did change our lives, spiritually, emotionally, physically. And I would submit to you that the experience of giving to the church in that 36 hour period did just as much to educate us about the economic realities of life on the border as the visits we made into the desert or to the Just Coffee facility or to the migrant resource center.

We gave back as a reminder that everything we have received comes from God. And we gave back as a reminder that God has asked us—no, God has *commanded* us—to share what we have with others. And we gave back as a reminder that we might someday need help ourselves. And that, too, is a gift from God.

So, my friends, on this Pledge Dedication Sunday, I invite us all to gather in the spirit of those four teenagers and their adult leaders in Agua Prieta making decisions about our budget and what we think we can afford. Food, of course. Shelter, no doubt, Clothing down the road. But giving back to God ... perhaps we really can afford it. Perhaps, in this era of climate change and political instability, we can't afford *not* to.

God really has provided for everything we need, just as God provided for the Israelites wandering in the desert ... just as God provided for the first century Judeans in the time of Jesus ... just as God provides for 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians—and people of all faiths—across any border in any part of the world during any economic cycle.

And our job is to say thank you ... and to share.

Amen.