

## “Tithing and Kindness in Lent”

LaPorte New Church Swedenborgian  
Rev. Kit B. Billings, M.Div, M.A.  
March 6, 2022

### Scripture

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Matthew 6:1-4

### Hymns or Songs

"This Is the Day"

"As the Deer"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UZv3jzOTE70>

"He Leadeth Me" 244

### **Deuteronomy 26:1-11**

#### ***Offerings and Firstfruits and Tithes***

**26** "When you come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance and have taken possession of it and live in it, <sup>2</sup> you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from your land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket, and you shall go to the place that the LORD your God will choose, to make his name to dwell there. <sup>3</sup> And you shall go to the priest who is in office at that time and say to him, 'I declare today to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our fathers to give us.' <sup>4</sup> Then the priest shall take the basket from your hand and set it down before the altar of the LORD your God.

<sup>5</sup> "And you shall make response before the LORD your God, 'A wandering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. <sup>6</sup> And the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labor. <sup>7</sup> Then we cried to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. <sup>8</sup> And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders. <sup>9</sup> And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. <sup>10</sup> And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which you, O LORD, have given me.' And you shall set it down before the LORD your God and worship before the LORD your God. <sup>11</sup> And you shall rejoice in all the good that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house, you, and the Levite, and the sojourner who is among you.

### **Matthew 6:1-4**

#### ***Giving to the Needy***

**6** "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

<sup>2</sup>“Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. <sup>3</sup>But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup>so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

### **Insights for Worship**

*Revelation Explained* 675(18) by Emanuel Swedenborg

As “ten” signifies all persons and all things, it follows that “the tenth part” signifies everything. It is from this that “tenths” and “tithings” derived their origin, and these signified that everything was holy and blessed when the tenth part of the threshing floor and of the wine press, or of the corn and wine, was given to the Levites; likewise for the Levites when the tenth part was again tithed and given to Aaron. Of these it is thus written in the Word:

“Tithing thou shalt tithe all the increase of thy seed that is brought forth in the field year by year.” (Deut. 14:22)

“Say unto the Levites, that the tenths must be given to them for an inheritance, and that they must offer up a heave offering of them to Jehovah, a tenth of the tenths, and this from the corn of the threshing floor and from the fullness of the wine vat; and the tenth of the tenth they must give to Aaron the priest.” (Num. 18:24–28)

### **SERMON: “Tithing and Kindness in Lent”** by Rev. Kit Billings

On this first Sunday in the Season of Lent, which began this past Wednesday, I think it is important to begin by remembering what the essence of Lent is: Lent is a 40 day long Christian observance in our liturgical calendar, which invites us to remember what our Lord Jesus Christ did after His baptism just before He began His public ministry. Our Lord went out into the desert for 40 days and nights, when He fasted and prayed and faced the spirits of Hell, which were overwhelming humanity with their evils and false ways of thinking. The Lord knew He would be tempted, but He understood His need to glorify His human and Redeem the world, stopping our destruction. Rather than abdicating His responsibility, the Lord went forward...faithfully. The Hallmark of Lent is humble spiritual discipline—a time for us to retune ourselves as Jesus did by centering ourselves in core biblical practices and wisdom: choosing to examine ourselves and turn away from selfishness and sin, which opens up new pathways of goodness and happiness: *Halleluiah!*

And one among many ways of doing this is to follow the example of the ancient Hebrews that we’re looking at this morning in *Deuteronomy* 26. They listened to God’s wisdom and chose to embrace the commandments God had given them about expressing gratitude to the Lord for His many mighty acts of saving the Hebrews from

disasters and leading them into lands of plenty. They embraced God's wisdom within their religious practice called "tithing of their firstfruits." Tithing firstfruits is simply about saying "thank you" to God by giving back a portion of the money, the food and the skills and talents we have been given out of God's gracious hands. This biblical wisdom is really **all about BALANCE**: of freely choosing to be both a recipient and a giver, in ways that are healthy, manageable and spiritually inspiring.

Did you know that money is mentioned over 800 times in the Holy Bible? It is. And I think it is because God knew a long, long time ago that money and assets would and should be something we all hold dear to our lives, something we would naturally put a lot of importance on. And you know, managing our money and assets wisely can be part of how the Lord guides us into greater happiness and joy, when we use some of it to give to the church what she needs to prosper.

In the Lord's New Christianity we are taught in seminary to treat our money and wealth with wisdom, making sure to give to God first what He needs to best be able to educate and care for His people through the well supported ministries in the church. In short, tithing is about a spirit of gratitude toward God and of genuinely wanting to respond back to God's gifts by giving back in return. Listen to these verses in *Proverbs 3:9-10*: "Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine." And now listen to what our Lord Jesus said about a "widow's mite" from *Mark 12:41-44*: "Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. <sup>42</sup>But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents. <sup>43</sup>Calling His disciples to Him, Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. <sup>44</sup>They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.'" I love this story because in it our Lord emphasized that contributions should be genuinely meaningful, felt by the contributor to be giving up something of real value to the Lord, not just some easily replaced or disposable income.

But, ultimately, it is not the amount of our giving that matters most, but rather the spirit with which we give back to God and our church in return.

The Lord is giving to us constantly: by sustaining our very existence, our bodies and our consciousness. God provides this entire planet, where we can develop and thrive. He gives us every needed thing. He gives His Word for the healing of the nations and provides for it to be read and its understanding to be taught. The Lord sustains our ability to think and reason wisely, and He gives us the awesome power in our wills to love—and He hopes that we choose to respond back with joyful giving in return. The inner-symbolic meaning of tithing back 10% of what God gives us bids us also to remember that a major part of what the Lord gives all of us are His amazing gifts of "spiritual remains" during our infancy and childhood. These "spiritual remains" are

treasures of subconscious, heavenly impressions of God's love and truth that we all receive as infants and children, which literally help the Lord to maintain psychological and spiritual balance throughout our lives. These holy "remains" or remnants of God's goodness are then tapped by the Lord Himself in our adulthood, during our active regeneration, as God guides us into our highest potential as angels-in-training!

So, symbolically, when we tithe, we are also saying "thank you" to the Lord for His intra-psychic gifts He gave us long ago when we were babies and youngsters, enjoying the magical kingdom of childhood we were blessed to receive.

The subject of tithing was meant from the beginning to never be one involving stress and an over-emphasis on badgering congregations to give beyond our means. Tithing is simply part of what God knows we need to understand about a wide variety of ways we can give back to the Lord out of the abundance He gives to us. So, in this spirit of warmth and joy, let me interject a bit of humor now as follows: Three religious leaders of the community, a priest, a rabbi, and an evangelical preacher are sitting around talking about how they run their finances. The priest says, "At the end of the week, I make a line on the floor. Then I take all of the money out of the donation box, throw it in the air, and what lands on the left is for God and the church, and what lands on the right is for me."

The rabbi says, "I do something similar. At the end of the week, I draw a big circle on the floor. I throw the donation money into the air, and whatever lands in the circle is for God and the temple and whatever lands outside the circle is for me."

The evangelical preacher perks up with his thick southern drawl and says, "I do something similar too. At the end of the week, I throw all of the donation money into the air." And with a smile he concludes: "Whatever God catches, he keeps." 😊

Tithing goes way back to the times of Abraham, Jacob and Moses. Jacob proclaimed aloud to the Lord (in Gen. 28:22): "...this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me, I will give you a tenth." Moses was led by God to bring the ancient Hebrew people deliverance from bondage in Egypt. God helped our Hebrew sisters and brothers to understand that tithing is also meant to be a time when we thank God for helping us through our toughest and most difficult times we face in our lives—recognizing that just like Moses and the Hebrews being saved from slavery, God keeps us from drowning mentally, emotionally and spiritually, enabling us to actually learn and grow from our trying times also. Through tithing in this conscious spiritual discipline, God is inviting us to recall our own major moments of deliverance, recalling our own sacred history and stories of our lives, which have helped us grow and strengthen in faith. The ancient Hebrews remembered how the Lord brought them from desert wanderers into becoming a holy nation dwelling in their Promised Land. He bids you to do the same with your life journey too.

When did the Lord deliver you out of your own most difficult and trying times? Maybe He is doing it right now as we speak. And so, before you tithe each week, I invite

you to not only give thanks for when God delivered Moses and the Israelites out of slavery to become a holy people founded on the Ten Commandments. I also invite you to take a bit of time and remember when the Lord delivered you. So, in this way, be like Moses back then and thank the Lord for saving your life when things were at their hardest.

The essence of this spiritual Law called “tithing,” was a reminder to not allow the importance of God and all that good religion gives us in life to slip back onto the “back burner” of our thoughts. Rather, this Law of tithing 10% of their firstfruits helped them to learn that giving back to God is meant to be our first and foremost response to when we earn money or grow good crops. From the Scriptural representation of “offering firstfruits to the Lord,” it is teaching Jewish and Christian believers to actually put “the Lord’s share” into our contribution envelopes when returning home on payday, so as not to be caught short on Sunday morning in spite of our best intentions. **In other words it’s about reprioritizing our personal expenses to serve the Lord first, and then living on what’s left, rather than living our lives first and serving the Lord second.**

So, within the light of this wisdom we can ask ourselves, how much do we really value the Church and its congregational and educational development for the spiritual growth and salvation of humanity? What is our share in providing “the Lord’s share” in sustaining His Church? These are serious questions for all of us to deal with. It has been said that if most of the Church’s members who are able to do so gave even half of their annual tithe – which is 5% of their incomes to God’s house and its servants – there would be more than enough to meet all of the Church’s needs and plans.

But, unfortunately, the watering down of this ancient wisdom has enabled modern and ancient people alike to put ourselves first and God second. Our *Deuteronomy 26* lesson today helps us to grasp what it means to be a cheerful giver to the Lord’s temples or churches. It means following Moses’ example, hearing God calling us to “rejoice in all the good that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house, you, and the Levite (or clergy), and the sojourner who is among you.” (Deut. 26:11)

And out of all of the ways that the Lord blesses every one of us in our lives, we are called to not only give what we can reasonably within our means to our church back to God, but also to make use of the powers and talents we yield to care for the needy who are among us. As Christ said to His followers back in His time, so He says to us today: **“But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup> so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”** (Mtt. 6:3-4)

In conclusion then, as we begin our Lenten journey, let us remember that the Lord is giving us many amazing gifts! He gives us life, consciousness, our ability to think rationally and wisely, our ability to choose freely to love Him and one another. And

daily the Lord gives us our amazing New Christian Church and its fabulous theology. Within this church the Lord continues to call us to give back wisely and reasonably, through treasure and time, to care for our mother church. "What shall I render to the LORD for all His benefits to me? I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all His people." (Psalm 116:12,14) Amen.

Let us pray:

***PASTORAL PRAYER***