

Exercising Generosity

About eighteen months ago, I joined a woman’s exercise club, one of those reasonably-priced, three-day-a-week, thirty-minute-workout women’s exercise clubs that presented a golden opportunity to get in better shape so I would feel better and improve my health. What a great idea! There was only one catch, of course – I would actually have to show up and do the workout, because paying my monthly fee, carrying the ID card, and saying that I belonged to an exercise club wouldn’t take a single ounce off my weight or improve my endurance one bit.



What I did notice, however, when I set a rhythm to my life that included regular trips to the exercise club, was a definite “lift” to the way I felt, not just physically but mentally, too. Clearly, as we all know, exercise is good for us. It may not be easy, and it may take discipline, but it’s definitely good for us.

During the past two years, I’ve been making a similar discovery about generosity, and specifically about tithing. We live in a world that offers many “helps” to get our lives in order, to find a sense of proportion and balance and health, from exercise clubs and weight-loss plans to closet organizers and electronic calendars, from self-help books and Dr. Phil to financial advisors and “lifestyle coaches.” But I am convinced that these supports fall far short of the power of the gospel to transform our lives.

I’ve experienced this firsthand. As a member of the Stewardship and Church Finances Ministry Team of the United Church of Christ, I serve the region of the church that stretches from Virginia to Texas. Two summers ago, on a beautiful June morning, I was about to lead a workshop on

stewardship at a meeting in a church in Lanett, Alabama. We were sitting on those little folding chairs in one of the church school classrooms, waiting to begin, and just visiting and getting to know one another. When I asked the folks for their own thoughts about giving, two women, one on either side of me, told me that they had tithed – that they had given a tenth of their income to God – all of their lives, and that they both had found it to be a blessing in their lives. One said, “When we bought a house, we thought we’d better back off from tithing for awhile to make sure we could afford it, but then we thought, ‘No, we’ll just keep tithing,’ and we’ve never missed a house payment.”

So there I was, the “expert on stewardship from Cleveland,” about to teach them about generosity and faithfulness. I don’t think so. The day I returned home from that trip, I stood by my kitchen counter (I can still see it now), and I opened my pay envelope. I looked at my pay stub. I thought about all the blessings in my life, and I felt so profoundly grateful. I thought, what was I waiting for? Until I could “afford” to tithe? Until I wouldn’t feel it if I did? I took out my checkbook and wrote a check to Pilgrim Church (my home congregation) for one-tenth of my paycheck. And it was the best feeling I’ve ever had when I wrote a check. I’ve been doing that ever since, each time I receive my paycheck, stopping to think about my blessings and give thanks, writing a check of the “first fruits,” and then living on the rest.

Along with the other money I give to the special mission offerings (Neighbors in Need, One Great Hour of Sharing, Strengthen the Church, and the Christmas Fund) and to other ministries of the wider church, and to charities I support, and the money I give to my children...all of those are the happiest checks I write.

But then I discovered two more things. First, I feel calmer about money in general. I have a better sense of priorities in my life; things feel like they’re in better order. For me, the gift of tithing is like the gift of the Sabbath – both of them establish a kind of balance and proportion in our lives – they are, quite simply, good for us. Didn’t Jesus say, “The Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath”? (Mark 2:27)

Second, I discovered something that can best be related with a story about my two-year-old granddaughter, Allyson. Last spring, Ally stayed with us for eight days. Of course, I’ve loved playing grandma, giving her lots of affection and attention, and enjoying how cute and loveable she is. But for

those eight days, I had to be aware of her at all times, to provide everything she needed, to think about where she was and whether she was safe, feed her, bathe her, clothe her...I had to invest a lot of my time and myself in her. When the time came to hand her back to her parents, though, I thought my heart would break. I had bonded with her in a very special and powerful way.

That was what I discovered when I decided to increase my giving dramatically, all at once, to the church. I found that I love my church even more. I know I loved it before, but the more I give, the more I care about Pilgrim Church. And, mysteriously, at the same time, the more I trust that the leadership of the church will use my gifts well. Generosity, I have come to understand, is a discipline to be practiced and yet, mysteriously, at the same time, it frees our spirit. This experience, which transformed my life – this movement into a spiritual, everyday practice – would not have happened if two women of faith had not quietly trusted that group with their own stories of giving that summer morning over a year ago. They showed me by their example and their calm faith what it means not just to say “I believe” but to really follow Jesus, not just on Sunday morning, but seven days a week.

Questions:

In your life, how have you thought of the tithe?

How are rules and laws rather than freedom often connected with tithing, and how would exercising the tithe in freedom be a new and liberating “discipline” in your life?

What steps might you take to increase your giving, a little bit at a time, to reach a tithe in the future?

When have you experienced freedom and a “lift” because you exercised generosity?

Is generosity – like health – something that happens without effort on our part?

Source:

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Ucc.org/stewardship/tithing