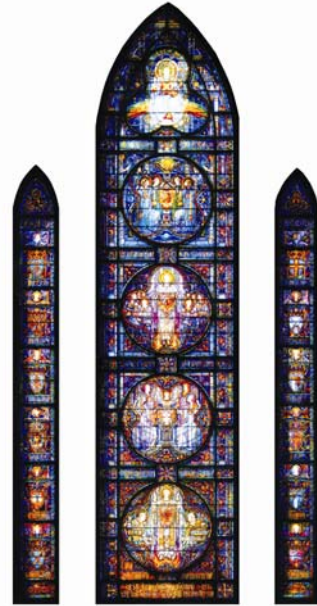


October 30, 2011

# Westminster Presbyterian Church

## Sermons



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### **Begin By Being Honest** By The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Malachi 3:8-12

Have you been following the trial of Michael Jackson's doctor for involuntary manslaughter? I haven't watched much just the sound bites on the evening news. But, from what I've seen neither side has been too convincing.

Not so in the Book of Malachi, there God's closing argument against Israel is quite compelling. Yes, the last book of the Old Testament, the Book of Malachi, is a prosecution attorney's closing argument to the Hebrew nation. The prophet affirms God's love for Israel, but then in the last pages of the Old Testament he accuses her of being a wayward nation. Israel is given one last chance to repent. "Return to me, . . . and I will return to you, . . ." (3:7), says God. God holds open the door for Israel to turn back and come into God's presence – an amazing invitation to a people who have been scornful, disrespectful, and disdainful of God. (1:13) Even more amazing in the light of Israel's response: she sees no necessity for the invitation! The Hebrew nation feels quite innocent and acceptable as they are. What more should they do?

God answers as a prosecuting attorney in the passage we read this morning. He starts out with an arresting sentence. "Begin by being honest." And then God asks, "Do honest people rob God?" Now we get down to it. The charge is stinginess, cheating, failing to bring the whole tithe, the required offering, to the temple.

So what's the big deal here? Why is God so upset? Why do we need to give to God?

Well, you who are business folk probably have a practical answer. They gave to the temple 2500 years ago and we give today to the church because there are bills to pay – salaries, utilities, programs. “The church is a business, you know.” True . . . but, only partially true.

In West Virginia folklore there is the story of a country doctor who was called out to a holler late one night to assist a woman about to give birth. By the time the doctor arrived at the farmhouse, things had progressed to a point where the doctor asked the husband to assist him by holding a gas lantern up high in order to illuminate the makeshift delivery room.

Before long the courageous mother delivered a healthy baby boy. As the father lowered the lantern, the doctor barked an order to keep the lantern aloft: “We’re not done yet.” Shortly, a second child appeared on the scene, a healthy baby girl. Shaken by the unexpected arrival of twins, you can imagine the father’s utter astonishment when the doctor said once again, “We can’t stop now. It looks like it’s going to be triplets.” To which the stunned father, still holding the lantern high, replied, “Do you think it’s the light that’s attracting them?”

There is one, and only one reason you should invest in God’s ministry. Because the Light of the World and the summons of God’s spirit attract you and you want that same Light to attract others.

Last week at a committee meeting one of you asked me, “Why don’t we see a budget for the church before we pledge?” That’s a good question and I think there’s also a good answer. It’s a theological answer. We don’t parade the budget before you at Stewardship time, because we ask you to give in response to God’s grace, **not** the annual budget. Budgets distract members from the primary issue, which is God’s share of our wealth, not a members’ share of the budget. To put it another way, God is entitled to a portion of our income not because the church needs it so much as we need to give it.

Many of you are familiar with the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. In the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church newsletter a couple of years ago this month, they printed the story of a former member who had recently moved away from New York City. When she returned one day to close on the sale of her co-op she visited the Pastor, Dr. Fred Anderson and said this:

*When I joined Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church about two years ago I was ecstatic about this place. I loved the worship, the fellowship, the opportunities to serve other people, the education programs, not only for my child, but also for myself. I took root and my faith really began to blossom.*

*At stewardship time that first year, we were beginning to experience the financial difficulties of living in the city that finally led to our having to move. I struggled over whether or not to pledge, finally deciding not to because I felt it would be too small to make a difference. Yes, I could have pledged \$5, probably even \$10 a week, but what difference would \$260-\$520 a year make? What a mistake!*

*Having not pledged, I began to feel guilty. Each time the offering was received I was reminded of my decision. And so, I slowly began to drop out. I didn’t go to the adult education classes which had been so exciting to me. Though I still got to worship regularly, I stopped going to coffee hour; then worship attendance waned as well. Eventually I disappeared altogether. You tried to reach out to express your concern and see if you could help. But, by then we knew we were leaving the city. Once we moved, I would look for a new church home. Well, now, I have just finished a membership class in our new church. In that process it dawned on me what had happened here. If only I had realized how important a pledge is, not so much to the church, but to me. What a difference my last two years here would have been!*

*You will be interested to know our new church **expects** each member to pledge—they tell us that before we join. I have, and it feels terrific. As I have thought about it, I decided I had to come back and tell you. Please make the point that a pledge is more important to a member than to the church. I wish I were able to come back on a Sunday morning and say it to the entire congregation—a pledge is a crucial way to express our faith.*

So . . . begin by being honest. God is entitled to a portion of your income not because Westminster needs it (Of course we do!), but more important you need to give it.

The Cherokees knew that. The Cherokee nation measured a person's wealth not by what a person had but by what he or she gave away. Erich From knew it too, as is evident from the quote on today's bulletin. "Not he who has much is rich, but he who gives much."

According to a German folktale, once a poor farmer died and went to heaven. When he reached the gates he was seated next to a man who was obviously rich. In a few moments St. Peter opened the gates and invited the rich man to enter. The farmer peeked through the gates as St. Peter and the rich man walked into the golden city. What he saw amazed him. A chorus of angels greeted St. Peter and the rich man with a rousing Bach chorale, and people filled the streets shouting. When the noise died down, St. Peter gave a short speech and concluded by saying, "Welcome to the city of God. Make yourself at home." As the rich man walked down the street, people continued to shout and wave.

When it was quiet, St. Peter opened the gates and beckoned to the poor farmer. Though he was greeted warmly there was no angel chorus or great crowds to greet him. "Welcome to the city of God." St. Peter said enthusiastically. "Make yourself at home."

The farmer was deeply hurt. "This is the last place I ever thought I would find discrimination," he said to St. Peter. "All my life I have watched the rich gain privileges that the poor were denied. I thought that when I came to the home of God all would be equal. Yet when I entered the gates I am not greeted by either crowds or choruses."

"My dear friend," St. Peter said, "I can see how it appears that there is discrimination, but it is not true. Everything will be the same for you as for the rich man. You have to understand that today is a special occasion. We receive poor farmers up here every day, but we haven't had a rich man in over 80 years."

Why do we give to God? Not so we'll get to heaven. Frankly, irrespective of this German folktale, I am of the opinion all of us will go to heaven whether we pledge to the church this year or not. Begin by being honest. We give because God is the source of light and life. It is destructive to put our trust elsewhere. We give first to God and to Christ's church because we have received. We give because we belong to God. We increase our giving as we grow in appreciation of God's love and in knowledge of God's goodness. If giving causes more pain than pleasure, it is not our money but our faith that is insufficient.

Well, okay, we give, but how much? I mean this is a rough year for some of us - a rough couple of years actually. Interestingly enough when Malachi was writing to the Jews it was a rough go as well. They had just suffered under drought and crop failure and locust plague and blight. When one is up against it as they were and as many of us are this year, it is tempting to guard jealously what one has.

How much should you give? You'll have to answer that, I can't prescribe an exact amount for each of you. However, I would offer you two principles. First, use the biblical principle of giving proportionately. Take a good look at your family budget. The family budget is a theological document. It indicates who or what you

worship. Pick some item on the family budget like college tuition or clothes or golf and say, "We're going to give to the church at least as much as we spend on that item this year."

Some of you like to travel. I do too. I just got back from a Rick Steve's tour to Belgium and the Netherlands. It was wonderful. I've been waiting at least 20 years to visit Bruges and I finally got to go - an amazingly beautiful city. What a great trip! Now, let's be honest; it wasn't cheap. But, I will give to the church this year more than twice what I spent on that trip.

Better yet, give a percentage of your family budget as a pledge. Use a 10% tithe as a goal. Or if that is too much of a shock give 5% this year and be prepared to move up a percent each year until you tithe. That way in a good or bad year, you'll know exactly what to give. You'll give as you have been blessed.

Ten percent, do you think that is unrealistic? Something only the Southern Baptists or Seventh Day Adventists do? Well, a scientifically reliable poll was recently done of how and what Presbyterians give to their church. (*The Presbyterian Panel* April 1991) Tithing may be foreign to Westminster but it's not to other Presbyterians. 16% (1 in 6) of Presbyterians across the country give at least 10% of their annual incomes to their church. 20% of Elders do (1 in 5) and so do 50% (1 in 2) of the Pastors. I may be mistaken but I can count on two hands the number of people who tithe in this church and one of those hands would be taken up by the 5 pastors.

If we met the national averages, we would have 35 Elders who tithed plus 128 others, instead of 9 or 10. That's right, we have 9 or 10 tithers rather than 163 tithers. Did you remember that chart that Elder Amy Lachman told us about last week?

Let's begin by being honest. Are we an average church? Is there anything about this church that isn't above average? Let's be honest. Is this sanctuary an average sanctuary? Is our music ministry an average church music program or our youth program just average or our mission program or our pastoral care? Yet, we are substantially below average in our giving. If Westminster just met the Presbyterian averages we would more than double our present budget. Think of what this church could do if we were just average Presbyterians in our giving habits.

My second principle goes back to my teenage years and the admonition of my mother. Now, who can argue with my mother? I never could. More than once when I had a hard decision to make my mother said, "Sandy, don't do anything you wouldn't want to be public knowledge. What if everybody knew what you were proposing to do?" she'd ask me. She called it the test of publicity.

That's the final exam I want to give you this morning. Once you've decided what you will give to the church for 2012 submit it to the test of publicity. Strip it of secrecy. Carry it out in the open air. Suppose your family or friends know about it. Imagine your 2012 pledge to Westminster publicly talked about whenever your name is mentioned. Picture it written in the story of your life for your children afterwards to read. Imagine it posted in the Narthex, listed in the *Chimes* or the *Dayton Daily News* or the bulletin each week.

Why would you want to keep it a secret anyway – unless you are embarrassed?

Let us pray – As we sit here in your sanctuary, O Lord, we can acknowledge that there is nothing we possess that we did not first receive. Help us to begin by being honest—honest with ourselves and honest with you. Enable us to give back to you a generous portion of what you have given us – a portion we would be proud to acknowledge openly to all the world. Amen.