



“A 10th of God’s Love”

Deuteronomy 26: 1-11

Matthew 6: 2-4; 19-21

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Many of the elements of our lives are measured. Consider the League Championship Series which is now underway *between St. Louis, (pause), oops, I mean, Los Angeles and Philadelphia*. When a player appears at the bat, his batting averages are flashed on the screen in our living room and on the scoreboard in the stadium. That number, expressed as a percentage gives us an idea of how effective they are in relationship to an ideal: that ideal being an average of 1.000, or, the impossible task of getting a hit every time they step to the plate. But consider that the very best players, those of Hall of Fame caliber, fail to hit 7 times out of 10.

In fact, we ourselves are measured... our employer measures our value to the corporation or firm or practice, by the salary we are paid in return for our time and the use of our skills, and how effective we are in their use.

But not only are we measured, we also do the measuring. Haven't we all been asked to evaluate something "on the basis of one-to-ten?" At the 1976 Olympic Games a diminutive waif of a girl from Romania, Nadia Comaneci scored the first "10" in Olympic gymnastics, which at the time had to be rendered as a 1.00, because the scoreboard would only register a 9.99. Since that time, Olympic scoreboards are now capable of registering scores of 10. And in 1979, Dudley Moore and Bo Derek performed in a movie that explored a man's mid-life crisis and his relationship to a woman who was someone's ideal of perfection... the movie's title: "10"

It seems then that "10," is an expression of absolute perfection, or complete-ness, or wholeness, or fulfillment, or accomplishment, and anything less is, well, less. In other words, when you have a "10" you are totally satisfied.

In preparation for this meditation one of the things I did was to go back to the original Hebrew text of the Creation Myths in Genesis. At the end of the creation stories the traditional reading finds God evaluating the work of making light, sun, moon, stars, the geography of the earth, and the creatures that inhabit it, and the text says, "God saw that everything that God

had made, and behold, it was very good.” But after careful consideration of the ancient text, I believe that a more colloquial translation is possible: “God saw everything that God had made, and behold, it was a Ten!” It seems that even God evaluates creation on a one-to-ten scale.

Now given the tenor of today’s meditation thus far, given that we have seen that “10” could be a symbol of God’s gracious love and goodness, the completeness of God’s gift of life and all that fills it. Everything that comes from God is a 10, the best, unequalled in quality or opportunity or grace. That also means that everything that we have in this life, everything we have had, or will have, since it’s a part of God’s creation, is also a 10, the very best that God can give. That “10” could also be a means of measuring God’s love. This creation remains God’s possession, but it is given to us to use, to manage, to care for, to steward.

In these weeks of this year’s stewardship emphasis, we’ve begun to address issues of giving in our day-to-day living: how we are empowered to care for “mother earth,” and how we are challenged to create a sense of justice in our world. Another of those issues will grow out of God’s word to Israel in Deuteronomy 26, where the children of Israel are instructed to bring the first fruits to the place of worship, and to declare that this is the proportion of all God’s good gifts which are to be given back to God. In that text we will hear that the “first fruits” of the harvest are to be the offering at the place where Yahweh causes God’s name to dwell. The wholeness of God’s Creative, loving, giving generosity is expressed in 10s.

What then does God ask of us in return? Why it’s another 10. But God doesn’t seek the whole ten back from us, who are God’s designated stewards of all creation, only a *tenth* of what comes to us is asked in return. But never is this tenth apportionment, this tithe, enforced. It’s all voluntary. And that’s why, as Stewards, as trustees of what God has given us to use, we need to strongly consider that out of the wholeness of God’s gifts to us, the “10” of creation, the “10” of the fruits of our labor, the “10” of our property, the “10” of our living, should be seen by us, as Leviticus says: “Holy to God,” and given in accordance with that holiness.

Our lives are full of stories that we have heard which become apocryphal in their re-telling, which might be understood in the ongoing folk genre’ of the “urban legend,” but to me there is one story that stands out as an illustration of today’s thesis that “10” stands for wholeness and that one part of those 10 is indeed holy.

It seems that a small rural church was facing tremendous financial crisis. It could barely pay its pastor, the need for building repair was an annual headache, mission giving had slipped to nearly nothing, and, well, you get the picture. On top of all this the church treasurer had announced that he could no longer do the job, and that that Trustees would have to find a new person.

All of them immediately settled on the manager of the local grain elevator as the perfect one for the job, but they were crestfallen when he refused them not once, but twice. They finally went a third time to this highly trusted man, and he agreed, but with one stipulation: they would not require a financial statement from him until the next congregational meeting. They would go a whole year without a financial report, and no questions were to be asked of him regarding the church’s finances. It was a strange request, but the trustees were desperate, and acceded to his demands, and turned the books and the management of the church’s business over to him.

A year passed. The time for the annual meeting of the congregation came, and with it came the treasurer's report. The elevator manager stood up and announced that all the bills had been paid, that needed repairs had been accomplished on the church building, that the pastor had been given a 20% raise, that giving to the wider mission of the church had been double their pledge, and that there was a budgetary surplus of \$15,000. The trustees were amazed. The congregation was speechless. Until one person asked the one question that was on everyone's mind – "How?"

The manager didn't bat an eye. "All of you bring your grain to the elevator and I weigh it out and apply it to your account. When I took over the church's finances for this year, I also opened an account for the church at the elevator. When you brought me your grain, I entered nine-tenths of your delivery to your account, and one-tenth into the church's. When you sold your grain and were paid, I also sold the church's grain and the church was paid. Not one of you ever came to me saying that you were shorted. You never missed what went to the church. You all became tithers, and our ministry and mission in this place is markedly better than it was last year.

Far-fetched? Maybe so. I've shared this story in farm communities and had several farmers tell me that this scenario would never work, because any farmer worth his (or her) salt would know exactly how much grain was being deposited in the elevator.

But impossible? Maybe not. God does deal in 10s. The wholeness of creation God declared to be a "10" and thereby good. What God gives to us to use is also a 10, the very best it can be, and a measure of God's continuing love for us. The portion that we, stewards of that creation are called, invited, inclined to give back to God is also a ten: A "ten-th", that is. All we need to do is to begin to look at what God has given us in terms of 9/10, with the first fruits, the holy 10th lovingly returned to God.

Please, let us pray together:

Generous God, allow us to look at our giving, not in terms of what we don't have, but in terms of the total goodness of your creation, and to learn to joyfully return to you your due. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Deuteronomy 26: 1-11

When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, "Today I declare to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us." When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the Lord your God, you shall make this response before the Lord your God: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me." You shall set it down before the Lord your God and bow down before the Lord your God. Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house.

Matthew 6: 2-4; 19-21

"So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.