

Testing God

Malachi 3:8-12

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"Will anyone rob God?" the prophet asks. Robbing God sounds like a dangerous thing to do. It is, because it puts the neighbor and your own soul in peril.

When the Word of the Lord came to the prophet Malachi, it had been about a hundred years since the Hebrews had returned to Jerusalem from their Babylonian captivity. With their hearts filled with a dream of the coming Messiah, they eagerly rebuilt the temple. But that was a hundred years ago, and apparently the Lord was slow in coming. The excitement of the earlier dream had died down. Now life for the Jews had become increasingly drab, ordinary, and uninspiring. In the words of the prophet Zechariah, it was a "day of small things."

The great dreams that had once burned bright in the hearts of the grandparents, dreams of returning to a homeland to rebuild it, had now grown cold in the hearts of the grandchildren. A city that was once the seat of king David, was now only a minor administrative unit in the vast Persian empire. The walls around the city were crumbling and filled with huge gaps. The priests in the newly restored temple were bored and without vision. Everyone in the city was committed only to tending their own gardens. It was a day of small things. It is always a day of small things when people lose the visions that once united them.

Some would say that we in American society are now living in a day of small things. The preoccupation with our own rights and wealth has left us so divided as a people that we are now completely without compelling vision as a people. Our courts will be tied up to eternity with litigation. Our political parties are deadlocked in a stalemate of power. We are without any mandate from the electorate. We can't even seem to get a president elected. But that is only symptomatic of a larger paralysis in society. We cannot move to the left, or to the right, or most importantly, straight ahead. This is not the fault of the politicians or the lawyers. We have only ourselves to blame. It is we who bind these public servants preventing them from leadership, insisting that they fight only to give us more small things. It is this fight for more that divides us and sucks away our dreams.

In 1920, when my grandparents were a young couple, the typical work week was 60 hours, if they had work. The most common American household appliance was a woman, who worked a lot more than 60 hours. The leisure industry did not exist because most people didn't have leisure. For more than half the American population the family bathroom was a hole in the back yard. And life expectancy was 54 years, which was just as well because few had pensions then.

No, in 1920, they didn't have much. What they did have were dreams. These were the dreams of immigrants who had come to a new land and worked tirelessly on farms, in small businesses, and even sweat shops, all in the hope that their children would get an education and do better. It never occurred to my grandfather to ask himself if he were happy. That was never the goal. The goal was to live honorably, fulfill his commitments to family and community, and to do his part even if it killed him. Which eventually it did.

Like the generation to whom the prophet Malachi spoke, we have so much more than our grandparents had. We are not exiles or immigrants. We are not threatened or in danger. We are certainly not poor. Some in the country are, but not us. We have so much opportunity! But because we have focused our devotion to the small gods of visa and mastercharge, we have lost the great visions that unite a people. Instead, we are having comfortable, but small days. Do you really want someone to stand up to give your eulogy saying, "Well, he was comfortable. He didn't do much. Just a lot of small days, but he took good care of himself." Or do you want that eulogy to say that you gave your life to things that make a difference?

If we are going to talk about your contribution to a great dream, you're going to have to decide what you

will do with your money. Because as Jesus reminded us: where your treasure is there is your heart also. If you want to know how you are investing your heart, and spending your life, just take a look at your checkbook. The real money issue confronting our society today isn't about the market, tax breaks, or the cost of prescription drugs. It is about stewardship. In the words of old Malachi, as long as you think that what you are holding belongs to you, you are robbing from God.

"Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say how are we robbing you? In your tithes and offerings! You are cursed with a curse because you are robbing me - the whole nation of you! Bring the full tithe into the storehouse..." (Malachi 3:8-10)

A tithe was ten percent of the Hebrews' income. The first persons to give this tithe were Abraham and Jacob who presented it to God out of thanksgiving for all they had received. Even though the practice of giving God ten percent preceded the law by centuries, it was woven into the Levitical tradition as a means for the nation to demonstrate their commitment to living under God, and to contribute to dreams bigger than themselves. People brought their tithes to the temple, which served as a storehouse of ministry to the society.

By the time Zechariah and Malachi began their ministries, the people had stopped tithing, which was the same time that they were reduced to living small days. In other words, they weren't just robbing from God. They were robbing society, and they were robbing their own souls that were created with a longing for great dreams.

Today, there is no small amount of debate in the churches about whether, on this side of Jesus Christ, we should continue the practice of tithing. Even those who believe we should continue tithing ask such questions as, "Does it all have to come to the church or can I give it to other charities as well? Is it ten percent of gross income or ten percent of net?" And the issues just kind of digress from there.

Jesus never abolished the practice of tithing. He certainly wasn't very fond of a legalistic understanding of the tithe that allowed people to think they were righteous just because they had given up ten percent of their income. But that doesn't mean he was trying to do away with the tithe. Jesus wasn't very fond of a legalistic understanding of the Sabbath either, but he didn't want people to stop worshiping. What Jesus does do in interpreting the tithe, as is so typical of him, is to make everything harder. He reminds us that God doesn't just want ten percent, because one hundred percent of what you have is already his.

A woman in our church who had come into a windfall made an appointment to see me to present the church with a check for ten percent of it. I thanked her profusely. And then said, "Now, let's talk about how you are going to serve God with the other ninety percent." I didn't mean she needed to give more to the church. I meant that as she used the rest of that money to care for her family and future, she had to see that it was all a way of serving God. To give only ten percent to God and do what you want with the rest is still to rob God. It is all his! As is the very breath in your lungs.

We have received so much. All of it has come out of the bounty of God's grace to us. It has been entrusted to you to do something worthwhile. God trusts you. He is using you to build his kingdom on earth. Which means you have a calling, and you are not limited to days of small things. In order to fulfill your calling, you have been given relationships, health, a home, work, and a check book to use for eternal purposes. When you have come to see that, the giving of a tithe to God is not law or obligation, but a grateful expression of thanksgiving. And we keep giving, to nurture the grateful heart.

You don't give just because you're grateful, but in order to become grateful. The more you give, the more your anxious and fearful heart is transformed into a heart filled with gratitude.

That is the exact spirit that is missing in our nation today - gratitude. After all the news programs we watched this week, did we see anyone get behind a microphone to say, "I just want to give thanks that we live in a country where the tanks don't start rolling after a confusing election?" But that is a huge gift. A grace from God that not everyone has. When we become grateful for God's many gifts, we get less demanding and more capable of working our way through complexity.

At least, let the church understand this. Let us know how to develop gratitude and come before God with tithes and offerings saying, "God you have given so much to me. I dare not demand more. I dare not reduce life to arguing for my rights. I dare not miss my opportunity to give to you."

Now, we have never been short on excuses for why we cannot give. "Right now isn't a really good time for me," we say. "Right now I have to get out from under some huge bills." Or, "Right now the market isn't doing very well." Malachi portrays God responding to these excuses by reminding us that the call to stewardship can never be relegated to the affordable future.

"Put me to the test," says the Lord, "and see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you, and pour down for you an overwhelming blessing." Sounds like a challenge to me - a challenge you cannot afford to pass up. Not if you want your life to amount to something more than days of small things.

O Lord, take all that we have, even life itself, and use it for the sacred dream of bringing our world a little closer to yours. Amen.