

Spend Your Money for Whatever You Wish
Deuteronomy 14: 22-29
Celebration Sunday November 13, 2011
Pastor Vern Christopherson

I have to admit, I like picking sermon titles that get people's attention. For example, a little over a year ago I decided to preach on the topic, *God helps those who help themselves*. The title got just the reaction I was hoping for. A number of you made comments. There was even a comment or two I wasn't expecting. Bishop Huck was driving by the church one day. He noticed the sermon title. Let's just say: he wasn't crazy about it. Being the good bishop that he is, he promptly called the church office. I wasn't there, but Pastor Jason was. Pastor Jason had been on staff at Zumbro for—let's see—about a week. The bishop, with some urgency in his voice, asked him, "What are you preaching on over there, anyway?" Pastor Jason blurted out, "I'm not preaching on anything. Pastor Vern is." *Pause*. Pastor Jason continued: "You need to know, Bishop, I am not my directing pastor's keeper?"

Believe it or not, when I picked the sermon title for this week, *Spend Your Money for Whatever You Wish*, I was really kind of hoping to get a call from the bishop. But no call came. In my defense, at least this title comes from the Bible: Deuteronomy 14. Then again, to avoid the perception that we're simply encouraging people to jump start their Christmas shopping, we might want to take a take a close look at the background of Deuteronomy.

The people of Israel are camped on the eastern edge of the Jordan River. Forty long, challenging years in the wilderness are finally coming to an end. They're ready to enter the Promised Land. The book of Deuteronomy is set up as one last sermon of Moses before they cross the river. It covers many of the situations they'll be facing in the new land.

Set apart a tithe of all the produce of the land, says Moses: your grain, your wine, your oil, the firstborn of your flocks. Take it to the temple. And then eat it in the presence of the Lord. In other words, as you enter this land, and start harvesting crops, be sure to do some feasting with all that God has given you.

The directions continue: *If the temple is far away, sell your portion of the tithe, turn it into money, travel to the distant temple, and then spend your money for whatever*

you wish: oxen, sheep, wine, strong drink, or whatever you desire. And then, in God's presence, have yourself the same big party you would have had back home.

Spend your money for whatever you wish? Does this sound like the best stewardship sermon or what? Way to go, Moses! But how are we going to pay the light bill with that? Clearly, at least in context, the tithe is not just about the light bill. There's a tone of celebration from beginning to end.

What are we to make of it? Historically, we know that various forms of tithing—or giving 10 percent—were practiced in the Old Testament. In many passages, tithing was set forth as a sacred duty. Sometimes it was a temple offering. At other times it was a tax for the king. At still other times—and we get a hint of this in today's reading—it was a way to pay the salary of the Levites and country priests after worship was centralized in faraway places like Jerusalem.

Still, why use the tithe to throw a party? It sounds selfish, doesn't it, even wasteful. We conjure up images of using our pledge to the church to buy a new a new I-Pad or a big screen TV. Tempting as that might be, that's not exactly what's going on here.

Notice where the Israelites take their tithe: not to the mall, but to their place of worship. It seems they need to see themselves not just as givers, but as *receivers*. They didn't raise the crops on their own—they had help. By feasting in the presence of the Lord, they're making a connection between those crops and the God who makes it all possible.

Spend your money for whatever you wish. Okay, we can understand the need for a party—we've all received much from God's hands—but why the extravagance? Shouldn't they be saving up for a rainy day? Perhaps, but in this land flowing with milk and honey they will also need to learn to trust in this God of theirs. Perhaps if they can—at least for now—"waste" some of their substance in a kind of God-sanctioned riotous party, maybe they will come to see that this party will not be their last party. Perhaps they will come to see that God can be counted on to provide for them again and again. Indeed, theirs is a God of abundance and not of scarcity.

Spend your money for whatever you wish. There's at least one more element to this celebration. Once they see themselves as receivers, and once they learn to trust in the

God of abundance, they are called to share with those who have less: the Levites, the resident aliens, the widows, the orphans. This party isn't simply about satisfying one's own desires after all. It's about inviting others to join them. When you allow others to come and eat their fill, say Moses, God will bless you in more ways than you can possibly imagine.

Today is Celebration Sunday at Zumbro. We've come to the end of our 40 Day adventure: *God's Building Project*. We've been reading daily devotions, digging deeper into the book of Ephesians, reaching out to one another in small groups, putting our faith into practice with community service projects. Along the way, we've been praying that God will build us up and make us strong.

As we celebrate our 40 Days, we're throwing a party. We've brought along our tithes and offerings. Oh, we've left the grain and the wine and the strong drink at home...probably just as well...but we've gathered in the presence of the Lord. And we've been reminded that we are receivers and we need to trust God completely and we might do a little more sharing with those who have less. And, even though we don't do it for this reason, we have confidence that, as we bring our offerings to God, God will bless us in more ways than we can possibly imagine.

Bishop Mark Hanson has an excellent article in the November issue of *The Lutheran* magazine. In case you missed it, there are some extra copies at the ushers' stand. The article sounds a lot like what we've been up to at Zumbro in 2011: God building up a church... so we can create a place for all to belong. Bishop Hanson writes: "We care deeply about the church, we serve it faithfully and generously, we are troubled when we believe it has erred, and we delight when the light of Christ shines bright. Therefore, it is understandable that almost unknowingly we begin to think and act as if the church is ours."

Says Hanson: This is not our church. This is Christ's church. We need to challenge ourselves to think bigger. According to Deuteronomy, when we bring our tithes and offerings, we're not just paying the light bill. We're throwing a party. And it's not just any party. It's a God-sanctioned riotous party to which all are welcome.

Hanson goes on to share of how, when he was growing up, his mother used to bake loaves of bread and take them to those who had visited the congregation. And then she would invite them back to worship by saying, “There is a place for you here.”

Finally, I believe that’s what our story from Deuteronomy communicates: there is a place for everyone here. The Lord doesn’t simply help those who help themselves. The Lord helps all of us, sometimes when we’re least deserving. The Lord wants to use us—Christ’s church—to invite and welcome as many as possible to the party.

It’s been a great 40 Days here at Zumbro. It’s been a great year. We’ve been creating a place for all to belong. You have done some of the most amazing things I’ve ever witnessed in a church. You’ve tried the two-minute connection, you’ve invited people to events at church, you’ve helped out folks who were in town for medical treatment, you’ve signed up for small groups, you’ve reached out to a local school, you’ve gotten the Dinkas working on crafts for a Scandinavian Bazaar, and let’s not forget, you’ve even changed where you sit in worship.

Way to go, Zumbro! I’d say, it’s time for a party. Amen.