

SERMON SERIES: "World Series of Stewardship"
SERMON TITLE: "Hit a Home Run: Bring in the Tithe"
SERMON TEXT: 2 Chronicles 31:1-10
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: October 28, 2018, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

With all the World Series baseball you might have been watching this week, you may not remember all the way back to Tuesday's game one. The Red Sox were hosting the LA Dodgers at Fenway Park. In the seventh inning, the Red Sox were ahead 5-4. That's when pinch-hitter Eduardo Núñez hit a homer that scored three runs. That 8-4 advantage held out for the rest of the game, giving the Red Sox their early lead in the series.

As I've read up about Eduardo Núñez, I've discovered that this guy who became the Red Sox's most valuable player in game one hadn't produced many scores for the Red Sox during the regular season. In fact, one sports article said he was among "the worst players in baseball."* But—due to some injuries of his teammates and some excellent coaching by the Red Sox manager Alex Cora—when Núñez's turn came, he was in the right place at the right time and ready to make a significant difference. No matter what his batting average had been in the prior season, Eduardo Núñez became a much-valued player that night with his powerful home run.

Throughout this month, we've been using baseball imagery to grow in our financial stewardship. On the first Sunday of October, we talked about the importance of stepping up to the plate by having hearts ready and willing to share. On the second Sunday, we talked about getting a base hit by figuring out a personal financial strategy for giving. And last Sunday, we talked about increasing runners batted in by encouraging others through our financial support of this church. Today, as we get ready to come up to the front and place our pledge cards in this giant catcher's mitt, we have one more baseball image to consider. Let's hit a home run and bring in the tithe.

1—BIBLICAL SITUATION

OK. Let's begin with our scripture reading from 2 Chronicles. Here's what was happening in that Old Testament time. Judah had been ruled by a succession of kings, some of them good and some of them bad. King Hezekiah was one of the better monarchs. The righteousness of his reign was clearly demonstrated in 2 Chronicles 29, when, in the very first year of his rule, Hezekiah cleansed and repaired the temple and restored proper worship there. In chapter 30, Hezekiah encouraged all his citizens to come to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, an important spiritual tradition that had fallen by the wayside under other kings. Then, in chapter 31, verse one, we see that Hezekiah's religious reforms included the elimination of false worship and the destruction of shrines to pagan gods. In verses two and three, we see that King Hezekiah valued worship of the one true God so much that he appointed large numbers of priests to care for the services of worship, burnt offerings, Sabbath day services, and special religious festivals. The priests would lead the people in giving thanks and praise to God.

Of course, none of that repairing of the temple, hiring priests, and offering sacrifices could have been done without an extensive investment. King Hezekiah himself dedicated and supplied a great deal of resources for the cause. Verse three tells us that the king contributed from his own possessions for the burnt offerings that took place in the mornings, evenings, Sabbaths, new moons, and appointed festivals.

Verse four tells us that King Hezekiah then "commanded the people who lived in Jerusalem to give the portion due to the priests and the Levites, so that they might devote themselves to the law of the Lord." Verse five indicates that, "as soon as the word spread," the people responded eagerly. With this strong spiritual leadership from their king, "the people of Israel gave in abundance the first fruits of grain, wine, oil, honey, and of all the produce of the field; and they brought in abundantly the tithe of everything." In verse six, we see that people who raised livestock "brought in the tithe of cattle and sheep." Other consecrated things were also brought in as tithes.

In verse seven, we read that the citizens of Hezekiah's kingdom were so glad to support this spiritual revival that, as the months went on, they kept bringing more and more tithes of produce and livestock and other consecrated items, so that these offerings to God started to pile up in heaps. King Hezekiah and the priests were grateful, and they blessed the people for their generosity. In verse 10, the chief priest Azariah told King Hezekiah that these significant contributions now meant that the priests "had enough to eat and plenty to spare."

If the image of heaps of resources and leftovers makes you worry about excess and waste, you can be assured that, in verses 11-21, King Hezekiah instructed the priests to build storage chambers in the temple, so the priests and their families could be supported throughout the year. In an agricultural economy, you can't expect a harvest every week or every month. Some resources had to be stocked up for the future. These provisions for ministry would enable the Jewish people to practice and maintain their faith through all the seasons of the year.

The way Second Chronicles tells about King Hezekiah's leadership, we can tell that he was respected and honored by his citizens for the priority he gave to God. Those were good years for the Jewish people because Hezekiah was an excellent role model and leader for them in being faithful to God with all his heart and with his material resources.

2—TITHES

As Joan read and I now have retold that story, you might have noticed that this revitalization of Jewish faith and spiritual practice was supported, not just by King Hezekiah's enthusiastic leadership and the work of the priests, but also by the tithes of the people. Whatever kinds of agricultural products they raised, the people brought one-tenth to the temple to consecrate to God. I like how verse five says that "they brought in abundantly the tithe of everything."

Our ministry today needs to be supported in a similar way. No, I don't mean you should start bringing in cattle or sheep or sheaves of grain. But the way we can fully support the ministry of our church is by bringing abundantly a tithe of everything financial.

A tithe is defined as one-tenth, or ten percent, of our income. Some people want to quibble about whether that means 10% *before or after* taxes, insurance, and other payroll deductions are taken out. I suppose we could have those kinds of debates. But I guarantee you that—even if we all tithed on the smaller “take home pay” amounts—this church's total income would increase. Not only would there be enough to fund all the ministries of our congregation today, but, before long, we'd be blessed to see some heaps and piles of resources for the ministry of this church's future.

3—HIT A HOME RUN

I've been talking a lot about the Bible story and tithing. But how does that connect with our baseball theme of hitting a home run? Well, I'm thinking of it like this. You know how I was telling you about Eduardo Núñez's three-run homer in the 7th inning of game one of the World Series? Just before Núñez slugged that ball, the Boston Red Sox were ahead 5-4. Since the Dodgers never scored any more runs that game, we know now that the Red Sox could have won even if Núñez hadn't hit his home run. But I'm sure it made the Red Sox feel a lot happier and a lot more secure to know they had that 4-run lead through innings eight and nine.

Right now, our church is surviving. The good news is that, other than the big mortgage on this building, we aren't in any debt. Our most recent finance reports from the end of September show us operating in the black. You could say that, in the 7th inning, our score is 5-4. As the game progresses, we might be just fine. We might hold steady for a victory. But who knows what the opponent might do? They might be like the Red Sox last night, making all those runs in the final innings. So, it sure would be good if we could score some additional home runs now to help us have that happier, more-secure feeling through innings eight and nine.

When faced with financial decisions, I suspect that most of us do a lot of mental figuring. Like a baseball statistician, maybe we even get out a pencil and paper or a calculator. We try to deduce what we can give that will be enough, but not too much. Of course, we do have to think like that. Besides our own household expenses, many of us are helping to support needy family members. In addition, many of us want to donate to other good causes in the community and the world. It's not easy to figure out how to stretch our dollars to all the places where they're needed. I know. I'm right there with you.

I just keep thinking about 2 Chronicles 31 and the image of King Hezekiah appointing more priests to the ministry and more people bringing in more and more tithes, until they were heaped up in piles and everyone had enough to eat, the blessings were abundant, and they were able to save up resources so that the future of their temple, their worship, and their faith would be secure.

What if we hit home runs like that by our tithing? Second Chronicles 31:21 tells us that King Hezekiah was faithful to God "with all his heart." What if we became spiritual leaders like that and did everything we could to support and encourage ministry in and through this house of God? What if we became like Hezekiah's citizens who "brought in abundantly the tithe of everything" so that our church could finally pay our connectional giving in full, instead of only in part? What if we had so many home run hitters that we could start saving up some heaps of money to pay off our mortgage and buy the frontage land between our church and 400 North? Wouldn't that be great?

CONCLUSION

Today is an opportunity to express our faith that God can bless us just like that. In a couple minutes I'm going to invite you to step out of your pews and bring home your 2019 pledge cards. Be sure to step safely onto home plate, as you place your cards in this giant catcher's mitt that Linda made for us. Come on. Let's hit a home run; let's bring in the tithe.

* <https://www.theringer.com/mlb/2018/10/24/18017674/world-series-game-1-eduardo-nunez-boston-red-sox-home-run>