Good morning, I’m Teresa Gruber, and I have led the stewardship ministry here at Forest Hills Church for over 10 years. But I haven’t always been so enthusiastic on the topic.

I grew up in a Christian home, with parents who taught me from an early age that it was important to give an offering to the church. As I got older and had more of a sense of math and the value of money they taught me about tithing – the importance that our offering be 10% of what I make. Eventually I started working and bringing home a paycheck – and I made sure to give an offering, but it wasn’t a tithe.

You see, like all young adults I had dreams, dreams that needed financing – like moving out, buying a car, getting married, buying a house. As I reached those milestones there were new ones – like furnishing our home, vacations, retirement plans. And tithing just wasn’t in the budget. Shortly after we started attending Forest Hills, my husband & I had a conversation about our giving. We’d been raised the same – we both knew we should be tithing. So we made a plan. See we’d been paying attention to all those stewardship drives that encouraged us to take a “step up” giving a little more each year than the previous year. We figured if we stepped up a little more every year, we’d eventually reach a tithe – it would take at least 10 years but eventually we’d make it.

Then one Sunday I was sitting there in the pew, listening to the sermon, when I was filled with this knowledge, this understanding, that I needed to start tithing now. Not eventually. I knew immediately that this was a nudge from the Holy Spirit. One reason I knew this was because in my humanness I immediately threw up the roadblocks. I can’t give that much – my budget doesn’t have the leeway. Giving more here means taking it from something else. It can’t be done.

Besides, it isn’t my decision – my husband and I make major decisions together, how am I going to convince Chris? There’s no way. We can’t afford it and he knows it. But the nudging persisted. I still had this feeling. This knowledge that I needed to tithe. But how can I do that myself when my husband says no? This just can’t be done.

I sat there fretting over it the rest of the service. It was an impossible ask. But the nudging persisted. As we drove home and I started thinking about how to approach the topic, Chris says to me, “I don’t know what you’re going to think about this – but I think we need to start tithing now”.

That day I learned a valuable lesson. It’s something I already knew in my brain – but something I obviously struggled to apply. When I felt the nudging from the Holy Spirit my job was to trust His leading, do as He wanted for me. It was not my job to convince Chris.

Malachi 3:10 is one of my favorite verses. It says:

Bring the whole tenth-part to the storage house so there might be food in my house. Please test me in this, says the Lord of heavenly forces. See whether I do not open all the windows of the heavens for you and empty out a blessing until there is enough.

The stewardship message in that passage is obvious, but that isn’t what makes this one of my favorites. It’s broader than that, separate from the offering advice. When I read this verse, I hear the Lord saying: “just do it, just trust me – try it my way and see how faithful I am?”

Most of us have at some point asked someone we trust for help. In the days before the internet, many of asked a parent, or a grandparent, about how to do things. Like how to sharpen a lawn mower blade, how to make fluffy biscuits, how to get stains out of the laundry, how to tie a tie. I recall one of the first Thanksgivings I hosted, my gravy was too salty. I’d used one of those spice mixes, plus drippings and it was too much.

I recall asking my mother-in-law and an older aunt if there was any hope to rescue it? They both said to put a raw potato in it. I was like really? There isn’t something I should be adding to try and balance the salt, offset it, cover it up? I was tempted to sneak away and look it up on the internet. But they both told me – trust them, do it their way – it will be fine. And it was. It’s actually now pretty popular to share tips online: cleaning, baking, organizing, gardening, etc. A total stranger tells you to try it, trust them, do it their way – and the next thing you know you’re putting a dryer sheet in a pan with hot water to clean off burned on food. We are regularly willing to listen to the advice of others who have more experience, because they know best.

In the same way, we should be willing to listen to God, as He has more experience, He knows what is best for us. And as Christians we do trust in the Lord – don’t we? We definitely want to trust in Him. Sometimes however in our humanness we rely first on our own knowledge. For instance my knowledge tells me I know how a budget works, I know the balance in our checking account, and I know how much trouble we can get in financially if we spend more money than we have. Doing something counter-intuitive in a situation like that doesn’t feel like I’m taking a leap of faith, it feels irresponsible.

In Proverbs 3, verses 5-6 We are specifically reminded not to rely on our own knowledge. It says to Trust in the Lord with all your heart; don’t rely on your own intelligence. Know him in all your paths, and he will keep your ways straight.

It’s easier to trust the Lord with your heart – and not rely on your own emotions and desires. But to not rely on your intelligence? That can be a real struggle – yet that is what we are called to do. Just do it, just try it His way, trust Him to be faithful.

Before we can obey the nudging of the spirit we need to recognize it. Frequently the nudging comes when we are listening or watching for it. We find ourselves facing a situation, maybe a problem or a known opportunity for change, and we take it to the Lord in prayer and ask for His guidance, ask for His will in the situation. But as with any conversation, after asking, we need to listen and be open to hearing the answer, and following where His guidance leads. The nudges we feel at those times are typically easier to hear, and we’re more open to obeying – after all, we asked for the help, we are alert and on the look out for a response.

How do we recognize it when we aren’t looking for it? Just like when we ask for guidance, we need to be open and listening for it – always, not just in response to the questions we ask. For me these nudges often present themselves as a thought that pops up, and stays persistently, and frequently they conflict with my personal desires and comfort.

As an introvert with self-confidence issues, it is very difficult for me to get up in front of people and talk, and especially to share personal thoughts and insights as if I have something of value to share. But years ago after my husband and I started tithing, the spirit nudged me again. Telling me I had to share the joy of giving, I had to trust that He would guide me and inspire me, giving me the words to say. I know right now He is nudging me to repair a relationship that has fractured. But I’m still resisting. I’m still angry – and others I’ve spoken to tell me I have a right to be angry, but He doesn’t seem to be taking no as an answer. Well we’ll see. I’m a bit stubborn on this one. I’m really angry.

If you think a nudge is from the Spirit, consider: does the thought keep popping up? does the question keep being asked? is the opportunity coming up repeatedly? Take a moment and consider what’s keeping you from taking action? It may be that it conflicts with your own desires, or emotions, your fears, your anger. Maybe you don’t believe it’s possible – your knowledge, your intelligence tells you it can’t be done. And of course pray on it – ask the Lord to help you discern what’s being asked and to make it plain to you how you can respond. I mentioned that I’m resisting repairing that relationship, and I know it’s because I’m angry. So I have been making it a point to pray that I move past my anger.

Sometimes you may not have as big of a window though to recognize and act on a nudge.

A few years ago, I was at a weekend retreat when we were allowed a long break. I decided I was going to use the time to go sit by the lake, spend some time in quiet reflection and meditation, go through my notes for a presentation I would be giving later that weekend. I grabbed a bottle of water and stepped outside. But before I got more than a few yards, a man approached me and asked where I had gotten my water. This gentleman was not part of our group, and we had limited supplies. But no worries, I directed him to the cafeteria, they have drinking water and ice – and there’s a vending machine if he prefers bottled water. But he asked again – where did you get that bottle? I explained this was from our group’s personal supplies, which are limited, and again directed him to the cafeteria. Well, he asked me again. Now I was getting irritated. I had limited break time and he was wasting it. I’d directed him to where he could get a drink. I again answered him, but this time I did it as I started walking, quickly moving past before he could stop me again. I found a bench out of the way, where I could watch the lake, and just relax. After a bit I looked through my notes as I again prayed over the message.

About half way through my notes, one of the key verses jumped off the page. I was to read Matthew 25, verses 35 & 36: “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink”. Well gosh. That wasn’t a nudge-that was a full on push. And I’d failed. See the bottle I was carrying was unopened. As I read that passage, I realized I could easily have given him that bottle, gone back and gotten another one. It would have taken less time even then the continued conversation while still not inviting him to raid our supplies.

I was caught not listening, I wasn’t expecting a nudge and I missed an opportunity. I make an effort now to be more alert to expect the unexpected as the saying goes.

When you feel that gentle nudge, or a full on push, from the Holy Spirit remember Proverbs 3:5-6 Trust in the Lord with all your heart; don’t rely on your own intelligence. Know him in all your paths, and he will keep your ways straight.

He knows and wants what’s best for you. He knows what works. Trust Him.

Take a moment to write down something that has been persistently on your mind – maybe listening today something has crossed your mind – it may be as simple as calling someone who’s been in your thoughts, or it may be bigger, like a job change or a new volunteer opportunity. Then over this next week pray over it, consider what’s stopping you from trusting the nudge then remind yourself. Just do it. Just try it His way. Trust Him to be faithful.