

A Tradition and Future of Giving

Luke 19:1-10

October 18, 2009

OK – who remembers singing about Zacchaeus in Sunday School? Good – a really big choir. Ready?

Altogether now:

“Zacchaeus was a wee little man  
And a wee little man was he  
He climbed up in a sycamore tree  
For the Lord he wanted to see  
And as the Savior passed that way  
He looked up in that tree  
And He said, “Zacchaeus, you come down!  
For I’m going to your house today  
For I’m going to your house to stay.”

Thanks. It was fun to sing it again. It was probably one of my favorite childhood Sunday School songs. It retells in such a simple way one of my favorite childhood Bible stories.

I suppose one of the reasons the story was one of my favorites when I was younger was because I could relate to ol’ Zack. I was called skinny and shorty a time or two and felt a little inferior as a result. But, you know what? The story is still one of my favorites and that is because of what happened to Zacchaeus as a result of his run in with Jesus. But, I’m getting a little ahead of myself. Let’s review the story a bit.

Jericho, the community in which the encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus took place was a wealthy community located in the Jordan Valley. It was surrounded by palm forests, balsam groves and Rose gardens. As a result it served as a major crossroad for goods moving from the Arabian Peninsula into Palestine and from there on into North Africa and Europe.<sup>1</sup>

Jericho’s resources and the plentiful supply of products traveling through it made it a lucrative center for collecting taxes and Zacchaeus was the lucky agent – chief tax collector - assigned to that area by the Roman government. Now, if you think IRS agents aren’t particularly popular in our day, you need to know that they were even less highly regarded in Jesus’ day. While we complain about how much we are taxed, the system Zacchaeus was an agent of makes today’s system look fairly reasonable.

The situation was this: there was no tax code or guidelines to determine how much one should pay in taxes. Basically, the government simply sold the rights to collect taxes in a certain area to the highest bidder. That is, bidders told the government how much they thought they could obtain from the citizenry in that area and the government awarded the contract to whomever promised to get them the most. The additional caveat to those seeking the contract was they were allowed to keep whatever they could collect over the amount they agreed to give the government. You can imagine the abuses accompanying such a system.<sup>2</sup>

Zacchaeus was rich because he raked it in at the expense of others. He’d made it to the top echelon of society. He was considered a prominent member of the Jericho community, a significant player because of the money he had; but he got there by charging his neighbors way more than was necessary. As a result, he wasn’t well liked. Most people would have chosen to do him serious harm if they had the opportunity.

And so, Jesus was walking through Jericho and this large group of people began to crowd around him just like in so many other places Jesus visited on his way to Jerusalem. Some have jokingly suggested that maybe Zack wanted to check out the scene just in case it might be another taxable event.

While Zacchaeus rubbed shoulders with the rich and famous, he was assuredly a miserable and lonely man. People really didn't want anything to do with him. He was despised, hated, ignored. But, he'd heard that this rabbi Jesus was different than most rabbis and that he was even seen by some as a friend of sinners, the poor and disenfranchised – people like he felt. Perhaps he wondered if Jesus just might be able to help him with the miserable feelings he had about himself.

The problem was the crowd was too large and he was too small. Besides, if he tried to mingle with the crowd someone probably would have recognized him and taken a shot at his head with an elbow or fist. And so, abandoning all of his dignity, Zacchaeus chose to climb into a nearby sycamore tree.<sup>3</sup>

Well, lo and behold, the itinerant prophet, rabbi, preacher – the guy who was causing all the commotion – stopped when he noticed Zacchaeus in the tree. And much to the dismay of those who were observing his every action and mentally recording his every word, Jesus stopped and shouted above the din of the crowd, “Hey, Zacchaeus, come on down out of that tree and let's go for a walk. In fact, I'm in need of a place to crash tonight. How about your place?”

The people in the crowd couldn't believe their eyes and ears. Why in the world would this popular up and coming religious leader want to hob-nob with their most hated resident? They grumbled to one another probably saying things like: “What in the world is he doing? He's on his way to Jerusalem – to the political and religious center – surely he should be garnering some support from those already on his side – surely some time in prayer would be better preparation than partying with this sorry tax-collector Zacchaeus? What gives?”

We have to assume that Zacchaeus didn't hear what they were saying, or, if he did, he didn't care because the transformation had already begun to take place inside him. The picture my mind paints of the scene is one of a short-legged man rapidly climbing down out of the tree with his growing enthusiasm causing him to miss several branches because of his short legs and finally tumbling to the ground at Jesus' feet.

Sometime between the time when Jesus said “come down” to when Zacchaeus hit the ground it happened – Zacchaeus' life changed. He became a new man, a follower of Jesus Christ. Zacchaeus, the crookedly rich, unscrupulous tax-collector was changed because he experienced the grace of God through Jesus Christ simply paying attention to him. Zacchaeus changed when he became aware that Jesus believed he was someone worth paying attention to – someone worth risking his reputation on.

And, because of his encounter with Jesus on a street in Jericho, Zacchaeus began to see things differently and he vowed to right his life. Because of his encounter with Jesus Christ, Zacchaeus no longer saw others as rungs on the ladder to success to be stepped on on the way up. People who were valueless before his encounter with Jesus became worthy human beings – people with needs. And, as a result, Zacchaeus pledged to give half of his wealth to the poor and then he promised to make it right with all those he had swindled. The law required that a thief, if caught, pay back double what he stole and here was ol' Zacchaeus pledging to pay those he defrauded **four times** the amount he wrongly collected.<sup>4</sup>

Because of his encounter with Jesus, Zacchaeus became extravagantly generous – he saw his wealth with new eyes. No longer was his goal to hoard more and more for himself. Wealth, riches, possessions became resources for him to help others. Giving, you see, is a fruit of God’s transforming grace.<sup>5</sup>

The story of Zacchaeus is certainly not the only place in the New Testament where we learn of the relevance of generosity for Jesus and the early church. We remember the story of the poor widow who gave out of her poverty teaching us that extravagant giving has to do with proportion rather than with amount. And then there’s the story of the three stewards given talents and instructions to use what they’d been given responsibly and productively with the one who buried his being rebuked, teaching us that how we use what we have matters to God.

The people who made up the early church sold what they had and distributed the proceeds to everyone according to need. As a result we have learned that generosity is a mark of the Spirit’s power to change lives and behavior. St. Paul included generosity as one of the fruits of the spirit along with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22). In passage after passage we are reminded that giving is always extravagant, life changing, and joyous.<sup>6</sup>

In Robert Schnase’s book Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations he observes: “John Wesley and the early Methodists practiced generosity as a necessary and indispensable aspect of discipleship, essential for the maturing of the soul and for the work of the church. Wesley taught Methodists to ‘Gain all you can, save all you can, and give all you can.’<sup>7</sup> He feared that the frugality of early Methodists would lead to levels of wealth that would distract them from their growth in faithful living. Wesley warned against earning money in destructive ways, by means that corrupted the soul or contributed to injustice. He encouraged Methodists to live simply, without opulence, avoiding the waste of money on things unnecessary. Early Methodists were invited to practice self-control, self-restraint, and self-denial. Such practices deepened faith, avoided pride and vanity, and resulted in a greater capacity to help others. Generosity, according to Wesley, was rooted in grace, an emptying of oneself for others, an expression of love of God and neighbor.”<sup>8</sup>

Two babies were baptized on the same Sunday in a certain church. One of the babies was a granddaughter of a family that had been members of the church for a very long time. The other infant was the son of a new family in the church. At the conclusion of the service the two families were standing around taking turns having pictures taken. The new to the church mother needed to get some things out of her diaper bag and the grandfather from the long-time members of the church family offered to hold the woman’s baby boy. Several members of the congregation were still milling around greeting each other and came up to the grandfather of the one baby holding the other family’s baby and commented on the baby he was holding. And several times he said, “Oh, this one isn’t mine; I’m just holding him for a minute.”

The next morning the grandfather called the pastor and asked if he could come see the pastor about something that was on his mind. The pastor said sure while replaying in his mind the day before’s service wondering what might have gone wrong to upset the long-term member.

When the grandfather arrived he said to the pastor, “I want to change my will to include the church, and I want to talk to you about how to do that.”

It caught the pastor off guard. Stunned, he asked the grandfather what had brought him to this decision.

The grandfather's eyes grew moist as he offered, "Yesterday I realized something while I was holding that other baby, the one from the family that just joined the church. I kept telling people that he wasn't my child, but then it dawned on me that he was part of my family, part of my church family, and that I have a responsibility for that little boy just like I have for my own granddaughter. I've been a member of this church for more than forty years, and in God's eyes I'm a grandfather to more than just my own. I've taken care of my own children with my will, but I realized I also need to provide for the children of the church. So I want to divide my estate to leave a part to the church as if the church were one of my children."<sup>9</sup>

When our eyes are awakened to how generous God has been to us – when we become aware of how gracious God is to us – we begin to see things differently – we have a new vision of what is possible. Extravagant generosity results from a God-given vision being born in us that enables us to plant seeds for trees whose shade we will never see – and for ministries that will bear fruit that we will never see.

The Body of Christ thrives when we give of ourselves as God has given to us. Offering our material resources is critical to the mission of the church. One writer observes: "Every sanctuary and chapel in which we have worshiped, every church organ that has lifted our spirits, every pew where we have sat, every Communion rail where we have knelt, every hymnal from which we have sung, every praise band that has touched our hearts, every church classroom where we have gathered with our friends, every church kitchen where our meals were prepared, every church van that has taken us to camp, every church camp we have ever attended – all are the fruit of someone's Extravagant Generosity."<sup>10</sup>

We are the recipients of grace. "We are the heirs, the beneficiaries of those who came before us who were touched by the generosity of Christ enough to give graciously so that we could experience the truth of Christ for ourselves. We owe the same to generations to come. ... Extravagant Generosity is not just about the church's need to receive, but (it's about our need) to give. Generosity is an essential quality of spiritual maturity and growth. Generosity is a fruit of the spirit, a worthy spiritual aspiration."<sup>11</sup>

Extravagant grace results in extravagant generosity. Take it from Zacchaeus. He accepted the grace and forgiveness Jesus offered and rearranged his priorities. Too many of us stop growing with our acceptance of God's grace. We can name the hour and minute we met Jesus – became aware of his acceptance, love, forgiveness of us – but we haven't been able to take the step of letting God rearrange the priorities of our lives. And often where we fail to be fully converted – fail to turn over our control and let Christ come alongside us to guide us – is in the area of our finances, our possessions, our resources. It's been phrased this way: "The pocketbook is often the last area to be converted."

A Tradition of Giving has brought us to this place in our history as Maple Grove on the corner of High and Henderson and it is a continuation of and building upon that tradition of giving that holds the future of possibilities as we continue our witness from this place in this day.

Let us pray.

1. Timothy B. Cargal, "Faithful Finances," Emphasis, September/October, 2004, pp. 59-60.
2. Ibid., p. 58.
3. Robert F. Scott, "Thanksgiving In Jericho," Come Dine With Jesus (Lima: CSS Publishing Co., 1995), p. 52.
4. "Tax Reform – A.D. 30," Homiletics Online, November/December, 1998, p. 18.

5. Robert Schnase, Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), p. 110.
6. Ibid., pp. 109-111.
7. John Wesley, "The Use of Money," 1744.
8. Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations, pp. 111-112.
9. Robert Schnase, Cultivating Fruitfulness: Five Weeks of Prayer and Practice for Congregations (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), pp. 87-88.
10. Ibid., p. 89.
11. Ibid., p. 89-90.