

He Wants Your Heart
Pastor Judy Bangsund
ThankOffering Sunday, 11.20.16

Luke 19:1-10
2 Corinthians 9:6-11
2 Chronicles 5:11-14

Take a look around you... the generosity of time, talent and treasure. What joy! God has been faithful to us; and it is good for his people to respond in praise, gratitude, and giving. And underneath it all is a joy you cannot find if you try to chase it down. It is, rather, a joy that takes you by surprise as you act generously.

Today we read a very familiar story to many of us, the story of Zacchaeus (that "wee little man" of the Sunday school song). Although familiar, there are details that sometimes get missed and are worthy of our attention. You see, the fact that Zacchaeus was short in stature isn't the point. That wasn't his problem. Rather, Zacchaeus had fallen short, period. Short of what was expected of him, as a Jew. Short of what was considered common decency, even. Zacchaeus was, in the eyes of many, the classic example of a sinner and as such, shunned by society.

Zacchaeus was a tax collector. And you have to understand: Zacchaeus was a Jew but he collected taxes for the Romans – the hated oppressors. Worse, he was not only a traitor to his people; he was also a cheat. See, tax collectors were known for collecting more than their due. If the Roman tax was 10 percent, they might collect 15. Or 20. Or 50 percent – and of course, pocket the profit. The Romans didn't care.

We are told that Zacchaeus was the *chief* tax collector, so he was a big cheat. The chief of sinners. *Wealthy* – and on the backs of the poor. He was hated; shunned; considered the worst of the worst. He'd turned his back on society and on God in order to get rich. But one day, he heard Jesus was coming to town and he was curious. Being short, he climbed a tree so he could see. And – amazing grace! – Jesus stopped under that tree, called him by name and announced his intention to dine with him that day. We don't know what they talked about over dinner, but at the end of it, Zacchaeus announced a dramatic turnabout. He would freely give half his wealth to the poor and return four times the amount he had cheated his customers. He had turned from greed to generosity; from sinner to saint, for Jesus said, "Salvation has come to this house." Zacchaeus had been lost; now he was found.

Only Jesus can bring about this change of heart. Zacchaeus' generosity was not the *cause* but the *result* of a changed heart. When Jesus becomes Lord of your life, he will not leave you unchanged. Whatever had previously been the core of your being will be replaced by something brand new, for Jesus makes all things new.

Now, Zacchaeus wasn't the only greedy person in the world. Let me point out that you and I are not so different. Our default position is to grab things for ourselves – like the 2-year-old that has learned the word, "Mine!" (You know what I mean.) That's you and me. As we grow and mature, we become a little more nuanced at this game, but it's still our default. We are not unlike Zacchaeus; greed is part of our sinful nature.

We tend to grab and grasp what we have. Certainly with our money and possessions. You and I tend to sharpen the pencil pretty finely when we figure our budgets – typically putting our needs first, our gifts and benevolence last. Mostly, people give what is left over to God, and statistically, that comes to about 1-2%. Here in Silicon Valley, statistics show we earn the most and give the least. Think about it – employment is up, wages are on the rise, the stock market looks healthy. Especially here in this valley, we're doing all right. But giving hasn't risen in proportion. We also hold our time pretty close to the vest. (Right?) For you and me, time is more precious than money – we might often rather pay someone else to do a task, and save the time. Time is precious. We tend to grasp what we have – both time and treasure.

So, Scripture addresses this issue often. Jesus did. Did you know, that of the 22 parables on record, 16 are about money? That's nearly 3/4. There's something about the way you handle your possessions that reveals your heart. The Apostle Paul also taught about possessions and the sharing of them. In our lesson for today, he gave us three pointers. Let me give a brief summary. First, he took the maxim, "You will reap what you sow" to a different level. It is true, of course, that if you sow hate you will be hated; if you sow love you will be loved. But Paul moves that conversation to address generosity. If you are stingy about planting, your harvest will be small – if anything. But if you plant generously, chances are you'll harvest a big crop. So be generous with what you have! Think of it as an investment and reap abundantly.

Secondly, Paul says: be intentional with your giving. Don't leave it to chance – whatever you happen to have in your pocket. Take time to think ahead and pray about your giving, as we have asked you to do with your commitments to this congregation. As a result, you should feel neither pressured nor guilty about your contribution; you should be able to give generously and cheerfully. As to the amount, 10% is a great goal, but don't stop there! The challenge is always to give more. You are richly blessed. Be intentionally generous.

And third, don't worry about your own needs. While we certainly need to take reasonable caution and plan for the needs of tomorrow, it should not become a cause for anxiety. In a strange way, perhaps the greatest affront to God, and maybe the greatest hurt, is to worry. It would hurt a father deeply if his child were no longer to count on him. If she were to ask things of her father, but then go on to live as if her father neither heard nor cared, how sad for the father. Anxiety for tomorrow betrays a lack of trust in God today. For this we know: just as God is there for you today, he will be around tomorrow, too. He has more resources than you can know, and he loves you with an everlasting love. Shouldn't that keep you from worrying?

So, in a nutshell, that's Paul's lesson to us for today: Give generously, give intentionally, and trust God to meet your needs. See, generosity is both a gift and a tool. It is a gift of God; it doesn't come naturally. It was not Zacchaeus' nature to be generous; his inclination was to get and to grasp. But Jesus turned him around completely; not only saving his soul but also bestowing on him the gift of generosity. I look at all you have given today, and I think – what a gift it is to be generous. At the Fall Festival, while we were packing shoeboxes, one woman commented how it warmed her heart. And a warm heart expands in its capacity to give. I'm hearing stories from our OCC relay station of how generosity keeps expanding as the heart grows warmer. It's a gift God gives you – to be generous. And what a gift!

Generosity is not just a gift. More importantly, it's also a tool, one God uses to capture your heart. You see, generosity disarms the power of money. Generosity releases greed's viselike grip on you. Yancey says that "my need to give is every bit as desperate as another's need to receive." If the power of money has too great a hold on you, then it also holds your faith hostage. Your attitude towards money tells you a lot about your spiritual health. It's like a doctor who starts prodding and probing, checking to see that all your innards are working right. If in the course of his examination, you let out a yell of pain – that tells him there's a problem. And he might frown and say, "Hmm. We'd better do some more tests. It's not supposed to hurt there!" So it is when pastors preach on financial responsibility, if it begins to make you feel uncomfortable - - makes you touchy and sensitive -- there may be something wrong. In fact we might say, "Friend, you're in need of the Great Physician – because it's not supposed to hurt there." Generosity is not supposed to be painful for God's people. If you want to grasp rather than to give willingly, that says something about your heart.

See, generosity leads you to trust God. When you begin to give, warming your heart so that you want to give more and more, then you have to lean on God in equal measure. (Right?) He will give you what you need, and teach you what is really most important. To the rich young ruler who wanted to know how to obtain eternal life, Jesus counseled, "Give away all you have and come, follow me." Does that mean that you have to give away your money to be saved? No. But it does mean that salvation is a matter of whole-hearted trust. Salvation means depending on God to pay the debt of your sin. It means trusting God with your life. When you hand your wallet over to God, you will have to trust him more.

And generosity brings the best out of you. I watch our quilters work from time to time; it's one of the happiest rooms in the church building on those days. It's the same for the work crew at House of Grace this past month. It's about using gifts of skill and creativity – for others; about camaraderie as you spend your time together; it's about laughter and love as you think how your gift will light up the eyes of the recipient. Generosity leads to compassion, caring, helping one another – living out God's love in your life. It makes you the best you can be.

And one last observation: generosity grabs people's attention. A generous person is unusual; he stands out. Now, I have something to confess: I tend to be a minimalist. I make just enough food to feed the people at my table. I allow just enough time to get a job done. I suppose it's a carryover from trying to be efficient, to not waste anything. But it sometimes has unintended results. So, someone who is generous with time and materials and who provides much more than is needed – this captures my attention. This last week the Korean church that had shared our facilities for 6 years, gave us a thank-you gift. Together with their warm wishes, they also sent us an enormous basket of gifts: fruit, coffee, truffles, you name it. You know, if it had been me, I'd have sent a thank you card. Their generosity blows me away. They give... like God gives... and that grabs my attention. It makes me want to be like them. You see, God isn't after your money. God never asks for money. He's after your heart. And if the best road to your heart is through your wallet, he'll use it.

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So it comes around full circle. Because it all begins with God's bountiful goodness, faithfulness and love. God gives abundantly. He loves lavishly. We should do the same, trusting his generosity and love. And when we don't, then we need to recognize and admit that we are not what we should be, and turn to him in prayer.

Friend, here's the bottom line. God wants your heart. Only God has the power to uncurl your fist, to make a grasping hand an open and giving hand. From now on, seek the gift of generosity, and let God grasp your heart, and make you his own.