

"I will give back..."

Stewardship Emphasis Sunday

Luke 19:1-10
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Many of you may have learned the following lyrics from a popular childhood Sunday School song that does such a good job retelling this familiar story from the Gospel of Luke.

*Zacchaeus was a wee little man,
A wee little man was he.
He climbed up in the sycamore tree,
the Savior for to see.*

*And when the Savior passed that way, He looked up in the tree,
And he said, "Zacchaeus,
you come down from there;
For I'm going to your house today,
for I'm going to your house today."*

*And Zacchaeus came down from that tree, and he said,
"What a better man I'll be.
I'll give my money to the poor.
What a better man I'll be.
What a better man I'll be."*

What most kids (and most adults, for that matter) remember about Zacchaeus what that he was short. That probably helps endear him to children, since they too can relate to often not being able to see what is going on, like when in a crowd of people, because of what is now termed in politically correct language as being vertically challenged.

There's no doubt that the way Luke tells this story that he intended Zacchaeus to be an endearing character. The story itself paints an intentionally humorous picture. But this is far from being a lighthearted, simple story. It is packed with both theological and practical revelations about such things as self-esteem, self-consciousness, courage, prejudice toward outsiders, good stewardship, God's grace, salvation, and Jesus' primary mission to seek and save the lost.

I'm going to address only a few of these today. And I want to begin by commenting on this last point, which is found at the end of the story. Verse 10 has Jesus declare: "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost." After

what begins as a story about a lost person seeking to get a glimpse of Jesus, we learn that **all along it is Jesus who seeks out the lost!**

That's good news for those who are lost. Because in this congregation today, there may be some who feel like Zacchaeus:

- people who feel like they are on the outside looking in
- people who come to church in the hope that they will catch a glimpse of something meaningful and beautiful
- people who long for a bit of grace
- people who hear the words of the scriptures and hymns but assume that they apply only to someone else
- people carrying a burden of guilt and shame.

If you were to look around at the people sitting in these pews today (and at the person standing behind the pulpit) you will see people who appear to be very "together" – full of faith, confident, assured. But at one level we all know that really isn't true. **Like Zacchaeus, each of us now and then experiences a 'dark night of the soul' when we confront our own sins, our own shortcomings, our own need for forgiveness.**

But the story of Zacchaeus tells us that we are just the kind of people who Jesus came to save. Jesus didn't have much luck with the scribes, who thought that they knew everything. He didn't have much luck with the Pharisees, who figured that they were better than everyone else. But Jesus loved people like Zacchaeus, people who knew how badly they had missed the mark, but hoped to catch a glimpse of Jesus in the hope that he might, just might, help them.

So if you have come here today feeling like Zacchaeus, feeling like you are on the outside looking in, feeling like you are in need of grace that seems always to be just beyond your reach, hear again these words: "Today salvation has come to your house, because you too are a son or daughter of God. For Jesus came to seek and to save the lost."

Experiencing the sense of being lost certainly includes all of us from time to time, primarily because of our inability to always love God, our neighbor, and ourselves. But this isn't the only cause of lostness. Another part of the answer of who might be considered lost is those whom our society rejects and shuns. These are the people that others look down on, or consider to be less-than, second-class citizens. Biblical commentator Brian Stoffregen suggests:

It can be that the 'lost' sheep is out of the fold because the fold won't let it in. People are lost (or stay lost) often because the church or society may keep them as 'outsiders. [In this story] it was certainly the 'grumblers' wish that Zacchaeus *remain* lost.

Is it possible that we are sometimes guilty of secretly hoping that certain folks remain lost and outside the fold? Heaven forbid.

The gospel writer Luke had a strong theology concerning the role of the church. Most simply stated, it is this: **the work and ministry of the church, the body of Christ, must be the same as the work and ministry of Jesus himself. So in this particular case, since Jesus sought out the 'lost,' then so must we as a congregation.** How welcoming we are to the 'lost' must continue to always be a primary concern and focus before us as a community of faith.

Now, here's a strange twist on this story of Zacchaeus that you may have never considered. **Perhaps we can be more like the sycamore tree itself, so that those who are seeking God can climb up our branches, so to speak, to get a glimpse of Christ.** Commentator Jerry Goebel asks, "Are we looking down into the dark alleys and looking up into the sycamore trees to find the lost children of [God]? Our purpose [like Jesus'] is to 'seek and to save'."

I need to say a brief word at this point about the issue of salvation. As I mentioned in a sermon a couple of weeks ago, the Greek word that is translated as 'save,' also carries the meaning, 'to make whole.' **Here, and elsewhere in Luke, it is evident that to be 'saved' is not in reference to an individualistic salvation from eternal hellfire and brimstone,** of which I personally no longer believe anyway – but that's another sermon, and I'm sure I'll be hearing about it after this service.

To be 'saved', according to this biblical story, involves lives being transformed here and now. Part of Zacchaeus' salvation was that his heart was transformed from being obsessed with greed (as evidenced in his role as a 'rich' Jewish tax collector working for the Roman empire) to a heart of generous giving. His encounter with Jesus led him to declare that he would give half of his possessions to the poor, and to give back to anyone he defrauded four times the amount he took from them.

So not only was his generous giving a response to his own life being made whole, it also improved the lives of those around him. His generosity provided resources for the poor and needy, and restitution for the cheated. **The life of the entire community, then, is transformed by the 'salvation' of a once selfish tax collector who himself was transformed,** through his encounter with Jesus, into a person that others can now trust.

Perhaps this story reveals that **like Zacchaeus, our all-too-common desire for getting more and more has to be transformed – literally 'turned around' – to giving more and more.**

Zacchaeus' response took the form of action when he promises Jesus, "I will give back..." It is extremely important to note that **he does not make this offer in order to earn or win Jesus' approval, but rather as an expression of his gratitude to Jesus for transforming his life.** He is not trying to win his salvation, which is impossible anyway according to our understanding of God's unmerited grace, but is instead responding to the loving and accepting presence of the Savior.

This story, therefore, has a lot to teach us about *our* response to the loving and accepting presence of the God in our lives, and therefore, our approach to good stewardship. (You knew I'd get to stewardship sooner or later, didn't you!) **I think that we should allow ourselves to be influenced by Zacchaeus' attitude of gratitude, and his action of giving back.**

As Presbyterians, it is a traditional belief that we are blessed by God so that we, in turn, may bless others. We do that, in part, through the life and ministry of this congregation. Out of hearts filled with gratitude and thanksgiving for our own transformation, and yes in this context, our salvation, we are allowed the opportunity to give back a portion of our time and energy, our talents and skills, and our financial resources. **And not only do we benefit, but so does the neighborhood and the people around us.**

So on this Stewardship Emphasis Sunday, I want to challenge you to think about what it is that *you* can do personally for the common good of this community of faith in the year ahead.

In gratitude for his transformation and salvation, Zacchaeus told Jesus what it was that he would give back. As you prayerfully consider how you plan to give back a portion of your time, talents, and financial resources to the ministry efforts of this congregation, **think about how your life has been transformed and blessed by the saving grace of God.** And may that generosity be born out of profound gratitude for what God has done, is doing, and will do, in your personal life and in the life of this remarkable congregation.

Amen.