

“Fruits of the Spirit: Generosity”

July 12, 2020

Luke 19: 1-10

A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

During the long summer months when our children are not in school, moms and dads search for ways to keep their children engaged instead of constantly bickering with siblings and looking for ways to misbehave. One brave mom decided to take her young son shopping; at least the mall would be air conditioned and cool. After a day of shopping, a clerk handed the little boy a lollipop. The mother prompted: “What do you say to the nice lady?” The little boy obediently responded: “Please just charge it.”

We live in a culture accustomed to striving for more and more and putting off until tomorrow the cost. We also forget to say “thank you” to the generosity of others.

The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, names “generosity” as one of the fruits or manifestations of the Holy Spirit. And that is our focus for worship this morning: generosity. Generosity is an attitude or behavior of giving – of our time, money, food, or kindness to other people. You put the needs of others before yourself. It is more than just giving away money or stuff. When we are forgiving and gentle to people, we are demonstrating a generosity of spirit. If you give others help or credit, that shows generosity.

This morning we are going to consider the last person, according to Luke's gospel, whom Jesus encounters before he enters Jerusalem and begins the final week of his life. Since I was a child, this person has been one of my favorite biblical characters; I even memorized a nursery song about him. "Zacchaeus was a little man, a wee little man was he." He is the short guy who climbs a Sycamore tree to get a peak at Jesus. I think that part of the reason why I love this story is because Jesus seems almost playful in his interaction with him.

The story of Zacchaeus is the all-time classic example of how a person's life is changed from a life of striving for selfish gain to selfless generosity by an encounter with Jesus the Christ. It is a story about transformation, rebirth, and salvation. And embedded in this story is a simple statement about the purpose of Jesus' ministry – and by implication – the purpose of our ministry as the church of Jesus Christ. But before we read this story of Zacchaeus, I would like for us to back up just a bit and consider another person Jesus encountered not long before this interaction with Zacchaeus – someone who, by contrast, was closed to Jesus' invitation for new life. The person I am referring to is the rich ruler found in Luke's gospel, chapter 18. The gospel writer of Luke intentionally places these two stories back to back, to illustrate a contrasting choice we all must consider.

#### Prayer for Understanding

Loving God, your Word has the power to restore our lives. Open our hearts to the presence of your Spirit, for you invite us to draw near to you in order that we might receive the new life you offer. And in receiving that new

life, may we hurry to share the good news of your grace and love with those around us. Amen.

Read Luke 18: 18-25

The rich ruler, highly educated in the religious law, could not respond to Jesus' invitation to new life. Instead he draws his religious legalisms around him like a cloak and he cannot respond to Jesus' invitation to a life of generosity and sacrifice.

Now I invite you to contrast what the rich ruler could not do with what Zacchaeus is willing to do.

Read Luke 19: 1-10.

This story of Zacchaeus is about an individual who got it as contrasted with the rich ruler who apparently did not get it! Zacchaeus understood what Jesus was offering him and in response Zacchaeus opened his heart and home to Jesus - unlike the rich ruler who could not give up insisting that he deserved what he had accumulated and could not let it go.

Apparently, Zacchaeus, who was a much-despised tax collector, was also an informed person and curious. He knew Jesus was coming to his town and he wanted to see him even at the expense of proper decorum. Zacchaeus has some physical limitations that might prohibit him achieving his goal. And the crowd swirling about him, hated him, so no help there. But Zacchaeus was determined

and innovative; no weak-kneed saint here. Not manipulated by the opinion of his peers; unafraid to go out on a limb, Zacchaeus seeks the Lord even if it means changing his perspective and looking a little silly before his peers. He attempts to see his situation from a different angle. Zacchaeus is the epitome of the seeker, adrift without a compass, uncertain what he is looking for, but looking, looking, none-the-less. He is open, even eager to discover what he is lacking. The first step for a seeker is to know our limitations, our sins, and be open to change.

And here comes Jesus. He does what he has promised – seek and you will find. Knock and it will be opened for you. Remember those words. Well, they weren't just words; they translate now into action. Jesus looks up and sees Zacchaeus sitting up there on that limb. He seems almost playful with Zacchaeus. He stands under the tree, peering up through the leaves, yoo-hooing his name. The “hurry” in “Hurry and come down” is a nice touch, especially from one who is inviting himself over for dinner. Zacchaeus hurries, tumbles, out of the tree, “happy to welcome him”. And off they go, side by side, the crook and the Christ, walking to a table.

Confronted by the living Christ, asked to make room for Jesus in his home and at his table, Zacchaeus, that rich scoundrel, has a change of heart! He can suddenly imagine his world from a perspective of abundance and generosity instead of scarcity and hoarding. “I am going to give half of my possessions to the poor, and pay back four times as much as I owe anyone whom I have defrauded.” Jewish law only required a 20% retribution but Zacchaeus is prepared to give

400%. Zacchaeus gave, not to earn salvation or to merit some special place in God's kingdom – he already had that in the person sitting at his table – but he gave out of gratitude. Zacchaeus is one of the people whom Jesus encountered who got it! Who wanted a live his life differently – abundantly, joyfully, generously and in community. Zacchaeus sought out the source of that new life. He climbed out on a limb to find him. And Jesus was there, just as promised. And he offered him that new life. That was the sum total of what his ministry was about – to seek out and save the lost. Whether it be the rich or the poor, the Jew or the Gentile, male or female, black or white. It didn't matter. Jesus came into our world to seek out and find those who are lost and in need of healing and wholeness. The self righteous, the deserving, didn't get it – in fact Jesus scared them because to truly follow him meant stepping outside self. The Zacchaeuses of the world get it! We all might try climbing out on a limb – putting ourselves in positions where we might encounter the living Christ – trying something new; changing our perspective; inviting others to do the same. Some amazing things might happen and we may find ourselves entertaining the Christ at our tables. Zacchaeus may have been a wee little man, but he was a giant of a saint. He knew he didn't deserve anything, but by the grace of God he was gifted and able to share for the betterment of others and his community.

The story is told of a rich industrialist who traveled from his home in the North to vacation on the beaches of the deep South. Desiring to experience deep sea fishing, he went in search of a captain and boat to take him out, only he got a

late start to the morning and discovered the docks to be deserted with the exception of one lone fisherman who was lazily sitting beside his fishing boat. “Why aren’t you out fishing?” inquired the vacationer. “Because I’ve caught enough fish for today,” replied the fisherman. “Why don’t you catch more fish than you need?” the rich man asked. “What would I do with them?” the fisherman responded.

“You could earn more money,” came the impatient reply, “and buy a better boat so you could engage in deep sea fishing, purchase nylon nets, catch even more fish and make more money. Who knows, you could eventually own a fleet of boats and be rich like me.” The fisherman asked, “Then what would I do?” “Why, you could retire and enjoy life.” The fisherman finally looked directly at the rich industrialist and said, “What do you think I’m doing now?” Wealth does not bring happiness. I would go a bit further and say – living a life of selfish acquiring – of being consumed with “getting” also does not bring happiness. And apparently Jesus understood this truth and taught and modeled another way of living – living a life of generosity, of selflessly giving instead of getting. Food for thought and for the soul.....