

The Generosity Challenge

“Sealed by Faith”

[Luke 19:1-10](#)

This is the last week of the sermon series, *The Generosity Challenge*. In the first week, we reflected on the story of a rich young ruler found in the gospel of Mark (Mark 10:17-27). We learned that we were born to be generous. We were created in the image of God. We were born with the characteristics of God. So, our true nature as a child of God is loving and generous. Last week, we examined the story of a Samaritan leper found in the gospel of Luke (Luke 17:11-19). We learned that, through gratitude, more specifically, through expressed gratitude, we can become the person God created us to be -- loving, kind, and generous.

Today, we come to the story of Zacchaeus, also from the gospel of Luke. Some of you probably remember this children's song:

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 Saviour passed that way he looked up in the tree
And He said, “Zacchaeus, you come down!
For I'm going to your house today!
For I'm going to your house today!
Zacchaeus was a wee little man but a happy man was he.
For he had seen the Lord that day, and a happy man was he.
And a very happy man was he.

Yes, Zacchaeus was short, so he climbed up a tree to catch a glimpse of this wandering preacher over the crowd that had gathered. But there are a few more details Luke gives us about this man. Zacchaeus was rich. Overall, the rich were not portrayed favorably in the gospel of Luke. For instance, in chapter 6, Jesus blesses the poor but warns the rich. In chapter 12, Jesus tells the parable of the rich farmer who hoped to build bigger barns for all his crops. And when the farmer died that very night, Jesus calls him a fool. In chapter 16, Jesus tells another parable in which Lazarus, a beggar goes to heaven, and the rich man to hell. Jesus indicates that it is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. And in chapter 18, we find the story of the rich young lawyer who walks away from Jesus because he could not give up his wealth. So, when Luke says Zacchaeus was rich, it was not meant as a positive description.

And, there is something else Luke tells us about Zacchaeus -- his occupation. Zacchaeus was a tax collector. In those days, tax collectors worked for the Roman Empire. They were local entrepreneurs whom Roman officials contracted with to collect taxes, tolls, tariffs, and customs fees from the people they ruled over. Typically, the tax collectors would charge people more than they were required to collect. And there was no cap on the profit they could earn. As you can imagine, the system was open to abuse. So, tax collectors were assumed to be dishonest traitors. They were labeled as “sinners” along with prostitutes, thieves and robbers. Zacchaeus must have excelled at his job because Luke says he was a chief tax collector. He was in charge of taxation in his town. So, can you imagine how much he was hated and despised by the citizens of Jericho? Rejected and cut off by his own people, he was an outsider in his own town.

Another detail Luke includes in the story tells us about the social isolation of Zacchaeus: he climbed a sycamore fig tree. This very wealthy, yet poor man was hiding behind the branches and leaves of the tree. With the protection of the sycamore tree, he could hide from the crowd but not from Jesus. The popular rabbi spotted the man up in the tree and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” It was as if Jesus was proving his reputation of welcoming and associating with outsiders.

Religious leaders had asked him, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” (Luke 5:30). They had called him “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Luke 7:34). Apparently, their criticism did not discourage Jesus from doing what he believed to be the right thing to do. Before, the tax collectors and sinners gathered around Jesus to hear him, and he welcomed them. But, this time, Jesus invited himself into the sinner’s house. And he made a public display of it, as if he wanted to make sure that everyone knew he accepted Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector, the one everybody else had rejected.

Can you imagine the joy of this man? I can almost hear him shouting, “Hallelujah!” and singing, “I once was lost, but now am found.” He rushed down the tree and gladly welcomed Jesus into his house. Was the crowd happy about what they had just witnessed? Of course not. While Zacchaeus was rejoicing, they grumbled that Jesus became the guest of a sinner. But, their grumbling and criticism did not matter to Zacchaeus.

That day, he declared a resolution in the presence of Jesus and many others. He would give half of his possessions to the poor and if he had wronged anyone, he would pay them 4 times over. By law, those found guilty and paying restitution would have been required to pay a 20 percent premium. But, here he was vowing to repay people 400 percent more than what he took from them. After giving away all that he promised, Zacchaeus would no longer be the wealthy man he was. What risk he was taking! The man was short in stature, but not so in generosity. He became taller than anyone else in town with his radical response to Jesus’ welcome and acceptance. He was practicing extravagant generosity, perhaps mirroring what he had just received from Jesus.

In response, Jesus declared, “Today, salvation has come to this house because he too is a son of Abraham.” Do you remember what Jesus said to the grateful leper? Reading from the Message translation, Jesus said, “Your faith has healed you and saved you.” Like the grateful leper, Zacchaeus was healed and saved. Like the woman who was freed from her deformity and claimed as “a daughter of Abraham” by Jesus earlier in Luke (Luke 13:16), Zacchaeus was freed from his social deformity and his status was restored to “a son of Abraham.

Through practicing generosity, Zacchaeus became whole. He became the person whom God created him to be. Unlike the rich young ruler, who walked away from Jesus, he was able to let go of what he had held onto and experience the joy of salvation. His commitment to be generous with his possessions resulted in his transformation, which Cambridge Dictionary defines as “a complete change in the appearance or character of something or someone.” Zacchaeus changed completely, and it was possible through his extravagant generosity.

Generosity comes from remembering who we are. We are God’s children, and we were born to be generous. Generosity is an expression of the image of God we carry within us. Generosity comes from

realizing that God has been generous with us beyond measure. God has given us life, God has provided us with a church family and a place of worship, a place to learn and grow. God has given us our own family and friends, our jobs, and all other blessings. And best of all, God has forgiven our sins and given us new life. Generosity comes from responding to the divine generosity we have received as best we can. Generosity comes from acknowledging that everything we have belongs to God. We are not the owners, but rather the stewards of all the great things we have.

Today is a commitment Sunday. Once again, you are making your financial commitment for the coming year. Your giving is very important, as it is directly tied to the capacity to do the ministries of our church. Your giving pays our staff and for the upkeep of our facility. Your giving supports our ministries of teaching, nurturing, and reaching out. Your giving supports our denominational connections and missions. In concrete ways, your giving allows us to be the church God calls us to be in Campbell, in the Bay Area, and in the world. As Charlie Slayman, our finance committee chairperson pointed out in his stewardship talk and letter, the financial health of our church is not at its best. So, the church needs your help, your extravagant generosity.

But, your giving is important in a deeper way. Your giving is your response to the generosity of God, and your resolution to be generous with others. Your giving is your trust in God's provision and your declaration to let go of the control you exercise over your life. Your giving is your claim to be a sincere follower of Jesus. When you make a financial commitment, you are taking a leap of faith. Your giving is your faith statement.

On this sacred day of making our financial commitments to support the ministries of our church before God, marked by the Holy Spirit, may we experience transformation! In the holy moment of making our faith statements through our giving in the midst of our church family, may we be changed completely! May those around us also be changed forever as a result of our God-sized generosity! Sealed by faith, may we boldly proclaim to the world God's salvation through Jesus Christ our Lord! Amen.