

Bellaire Community United Methodist Church

October 9, 2016

“Giving With Great Joy”

Together We Can Do More, part 4

Luke 19:1-10

A man had a heart attack and was rushed to the hospital. He could receive little company and was not to be excited. While in the hospital his rich uncle died and left him a million dollars. His family wondered how to break the news to the man with the least amount of excitement. It was decided to ask the pastor if he would go and break the news quietly to the man. The pastor went, and he gradually led up to the question. The pastor asked the patient what he would do if he inherited a million dollars. The man said, "I think I would give half of it to the church." Then, the pastor dropped dead.

Generosity is surprising, isn't it? I believe we don't expect it as often as we should in life. Why is that? The world makes a lot of demands on our money. After all, our wealth is a valuable resource. And it's not that money is inherently good or evil. It is simply a tool. How we choose to use that tool is what matters.

Statistics tell us today that people on the whole are not very generous. Only 67% of American households give to charity each year. The average total annual amount? \$1,872. Can you guess what percentage of their income this amounts to? 2.2% on average. And about 45% of households give to religious organizations. Their total average giving is generally higher, but the average amount they give to a church is only \$1,703, about 1.8% of their income.

I find these numbers disappointing, frankly. We live in the most prosperous nation in the world, and yet our generosity, on the whole, doesn't reflect it. Studies show that the more we earn, the less likely we are to give. Even in the

1990's, at the height of our prosperity, the wealthiest households were giving away about 2.9% of their income. And the poorest households were giving away 5.5%. The more we have, the less we give.

The Bible tells us, in Malachi 3:10, God's goal for our giving is 10%, what we call the "tithe". God asks us to test him in this. Yet, many of us do not.

Our country does not have a money problem. We do not have a giving problem. We have a faith problem. We have a profound lack of joy, and it reveals itself in our giving habits. I believe our giving is directly connected to the joy we experience in a relationship with Jesus. And if that relationship is weak and the joy is lacking, our generosity is affected, if not totally absent.

As evidence for this theory, I submit to you the story of a man in the Bible, Zacchaeus. We find this beautiful story of redemption and generosity in the gospel of Luke, chapter 19. The IVP commentary notes that "Luke consistently shows how Jesus cared for those in need and for those rejected by society. In the Zacchaeus account these themes are summed up in beautiful detail."

Let me set the scene for you. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. In fact, this story happened one week before Jesus would die on the cross to save the world. So you know that his purpose and his mission are deep on his mind as he was "passing through." Because of his popularity, the crowds were pressing around him, curious to see him, as many of us would be if a popular celebrity was passing through town.

Zacchaeus, however, was having trouble seeing through the crowd. You know when you are at the Fourth of July parade, and some little child wants to see the firetrucks? Usually you move to the side and let them through, because

you can see over them, but they can't see over you. Zacchaeus was getting none of that.

Why did the people treat Zacchaeus this way? The scripture tells us he was a chief tax collector, responsible for collecting taxes on behalf of the Roman government in the entire region. I don't know how you feel about paying taxes; I am guessing not great. But Roman taxation was much worse for the Jews, and Zacchaeus represented the oppressors. In Jewish minds Zacchaeus was a traitor, an enemy. He worked for the bad guys, the Evil Empire. The Jews didn't want to talk to him, let alone make space for him. They cut him off, cut him out. They rejected him.

Have you ever felt like that? Have you ever felt like an outsider, like the whole world was against you? I have. And it made me want to hide. Zacchaeus did the only thing he could think of. He hurried up the road to a sycamore-fig tree and climbed up, so at least he could have a passing glance of Jesus. Not very dignified of him to do this, but he didn't care. It wasn't like the people could respect him any less.

Funny thing about sycamore-fig trees: They produce a fruit that is vastly inferior to regular figs, a Middle Eastern staple. These sycamore-figs, my study bible tells me, have to be tended to regularly. I think what we are seeing here is some literary irony. Zacchaeus was considered inferior by his own people. But that all changed when Jesus stopped at the foot of the tree to tend to him.

The scripture says Jesus was intending to pass through Jericho without stopping. After all, he was about to fulfill the greatest purpose of his life in Jerusalem. But seeing Zacchaeus in the tree, Jesus knew that here was another opportunity to show people why he had come. He looked up and said those

famous words, “Zacchaeus, you come down. I must be a guest in your home today.”

No one ever looked up to Zacchaeus, not literally or figuratively. Zacchaeus was invisible to the people. But Jesus saw him and looked up at him. Jesus knew what needed to be done. He invited himself into a relationship with Zacchaeus, signified by sharing a meal.

This was very taboo to Jewish people. They knew if you associated with someone who was outcast, who was “unclean,” you became like them. So they grumbled, they complained. Why didn’t Jesus come to their homes? Weren’t they more worthy?

Interesting, isn’t it, how Zacchaeus received this news with great joy, and the people tried to take his joy away from him? Have you ever seen this happen before? We all know someone we think “does not deserve grace.” We think, “Why should that person be forgiven? Why should they get a break? Why should I let them sit in my pew? I was here first! I’ve been more faithful. I deserve it more.” How many times have we acted just like the crowd?

First the crowd was going crazy to see Jesus, and then they complained against him. The exact same thing happened again when Jesus went to the cross. The crowd was fickle, and Jesus knew. And it didn’t matter. What mattered is what Zacchaeus did next.

In the presence of Jesus, Zacchaeus became a changed man. He stopped. He stood up – not that this was impressive, but he was now standing in the presence of the crowd that had rejected him for so long. And he didn’t attack them. He didn’t berate them. He asked for their forgiveness.

Zacchaeus couldn't contain his joy. He said, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

I was curious when I studied this passage. Why "four times"? Turns out, that is the maximum penalty allowed by the Bible. And Zacchaeus was willing to pay it. I wonder, too, how he was able to give away half of his possessions. Just imagine his home the next day – it must have been the best garage sale ever! Everything was free. Except, Zacchaeus wasn't selling his junk. He was giving away the things that suddenly didn't matter anymore. He had found joy. He had found salvation. Jesus had come to him.

Jesus addressed the people. He told them, "Look, here is a true son of Abraham." What's that all about? I think it means Jesus was saying, "This man truly follows God's law. He is not an outcast. He is one of you. He has been restored to your community." Zacchaeus didn't have to pay Jesus to be saved. He found grace. He found redemption. Jesus gave him a second chance. Jesus finally saw Zacchaeus for who he really was. And Zacchaeus responded with love and generosity.

Here's the most important thing I think we need to take away from this story. Zacchaeus, when he made his promise, spoke directly to Jesus, not the people. "Lord, here and now I give away half of my possessions to the poor." Zacchaeus implied that nothing was going to stand in between him and Christ. He gave what he felt God was asking him to give. He gave not from his excess, but from the heart. He gave sacrificially. He gave joyfully. And when you make a promise to Christ, you should keep it.

I remember climbing into a tree once in my yard as a kid. I got scared, even though I was probably only six feet off the ground. I waited until my dad saw me and rescued me. I wonder if Zacchaeus was scared. Not of falling, but of being found out. Scared of changing. Yet, when Jesus reached out to him and rescued him, he was changed.

Jesus has rescued me and changed me. And God has always made it possible for my family to tithe to the church and still have enough for other charities, for ourselves, and for our expenses. There have been times when it was tight. But I never regretted giving to the church, because I saw what a powerful force of good we are in the world. The church is not perfect, but we are loving and giving when we are obedient to Christ.

Have you been rescued? Is your joy meter full? Do you give sacrificially? Are you giving out of a response of love and gratefulness, or do you hold on to your possessions as if they were your own? George Mueller once said, "God judges what we give by what we keep." Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, your heart will be as well." (Matthew 6:21) Is your treasure with God and with those served by the church? Or is it in possessions that don't give you eternal joy?

It's time for you to hurry down. Jesus wants to enter your home, enter your life. He wants to enter your wallet and your purse. He wants to come into every corner of who you are and fill you with joy.

It's not about the 1%, 2%, 10% or %50. C.S. Lewis said, "I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare." Our giving serves an amazing purpose. We have a chance to be a beacon of love and hope to Bellaire. A steeple with a bell that

rings out hope. A light at night to remind people God loves them. Will we give like we expect those things to always remain true in this place?

As you consider what you give to the Lord and to the church, may you find that joy that Zacchaeus knew, and respond the same way.

As we continue in our worship with our offering, please watch this short video giving in the United Methodist Church.

<https://www.youtube.com/embed/m932eDLPk9w>

(For those wishing to respond to the recent hurricane disasters in Haiti and the East Coast, please give to the United Methodist Committee on Relief, an agency that is already on the ground and uses 100% of your donation for disaster relief.

<http://www.umcor.org/umcor/resources/news-stories/2016/october/1004hurricanematthew>)

Memory verse

Psalm 4:7 - You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound.

Reflection questions

1. Where is your joy meter right now? High or low? What about your giving meter? Do you think the two are related?
2. Whom would you identify as outcasts in your life? Who are your "Zacchaeus's"?
3. If your life were a house, what rooms would you want to show Jesus? What rooms would you rather he not enter?
4. What stuff do you have that needs to be given away? What are you holding on to, expecting it to make you happy?
5. What percentage are you giving to the church? What percentage do you need to give to make it sacrificial?