

"...a wee little man was he: Responding to costly love"

Stewardship Sunday 2023 worship guide



Gathering Prayer

Good and loving God, source of every grace and blessing,
We bring you thanks as we gather today for the many gifts you have given us.
We seek to be good stewards,
Lord! Bless us as we gather here to share your gifts.
Send us your Spirit and be present among us — in the mouths of all who speak, in
the ears of all who listen, and at the heart of all we say and do.
We ask in Jesus' name.
Amen.

Adaption: A stewardship prayer by the International Catholic Stewardship Council

Introduction

Luke 19:1-10 New International Version (NIV)

Zacchaeus the Tax Collector

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."

But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "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."

Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."



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Order of service

Call to worship

Invocation

Children's time: Zacchaeus

What does it mean to be popular? We can usually say that if a lot of people like you, or if people think you are nice, you are popular. I want to share a story with you this morning about a person who was not popular.

Jesus and his friends were walking through a town called Jericho, and many people came to see them. The crowd grew so large, it was almost like a parade with people on both sides of the street waiting to see Jesus.

There was a man living in that town named Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was not a very popular person. He had not been kind to the people in town. Because he had not been kind to his neighbors, none of the people would make room for Zacchaeus to see Jesus.

But Zacchaeus really wanted to see Jesus. So he ran down the road and climbed up into a tree to get a better view.

When Jesus got to the tree, he looked up into the branches and told Zacchaeus to come down. Jesus also told him that he wanted to go to his house for dinner.

Now, all the people who were watching this were pretty upset. Zacchaeus was not popular. Zacchaeus had not been nice to them; and now Jesus wanted to go spend time with him?!

But Jesus decided to be kind to Zacchaeus even though no one else would be. And do you know what happened? Zacchaeus decided that he was going to start being nice to others after that. He started helping people in town and treating them fairly.

Jesus showed us that we should be nice to everybody. Sometimes that means we should be nice to people who haven't been nice to us. By showing kindness and by loving people, people may choose to be kind to others.

Before we leave from up here, let's pray together:

Jesus, thank you for teaching us how to be kind to people. Help us look for ways that make people happy. Be with us as we continue to do our best to love others like you do. Amen.

Sermon: "...a wee little man was he: Responding to costly love"

Scripture selection: Proverbs 30:7-9a

Zacchaeus was a wee little man; a wee little man was he...

I find this Sunday school song interesting. It is curious to me that there are characters within scripture that get a lot more airtime, but don't get a song. But Zacchaeus (after his 10 short verses) gets a song written about him. In fact, before my study and preparation surrounding this text in Luke, there was very little I knew about Zacchaeus aside from what I recalled from that song from my childhood.

"Zacchaeus was a wee little man" – that's just another way to say he was short, right? "He climbed up in a sycamore tree for the Lord he wanted to see," But Jesus said, "Come down, 'cause I'm going to your house today." So Zacchaeus is a shorter man and Jesus goes to his house; seems like a pretty simple story.

But there is a lot at play underneath that children's song. There are a lot of bits and pieces that the song doesn't talk about; and those missing pieces inspire a lot of questions. Where did this all happen? Why couldn't Zacchaeus just make his way to the front of the crowd? Why is it important that he climbed a sycamore-fig tree? And the biggest question for us during our time together today is: What on earth does a short man in a tree have to do with stewardship?!

By taking a close look at our text today, we reveal a much more complex and emotionally moving story than the familiar tune lets on. As we begin our walk through the Word, will you join me in prayer?

Lord, bless our time together. Be present with us while we work to understand your call on our lives. Give us all ears to hear and hearts to receive your message for us today. Amen.

As we begin our study today, it may be helpful to establish a working definition of "stewardship." The definition I have adopted and what I use to shape my thinking is that stewardship is everything you do after you say, "I believe." It is about organizing our lives in such a way that God can do the most with us. This definition does not limit our stewardship conversation to money or financial generosity, but it certainly includes it. This definition encourages us to open ourselves to the leading of the spirit in every aspect of our lives.

Being a follower of Jesus does not mean that we are disassociated from the realities of this world. It does mean, however, that the way we behave and the way we use our resources should be different than our neighbor who is not a follower of Jesus. It means that we need to adopt a different posture in relationship to our finances; that we need to live with more open hands instead of clenched fists.

So as we read and study the Scripture today, let us consider how this passage is speaking to our entire lives. If you have your Bibles and would like to follow along as we walk through the story, I invite you to turn to Luke 19.

Verse one: "Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through."

This vignette occurs while Jesus and his disciples are in Jericho on their way to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. If you look ahead a few verses, you know that when the travelers reach Jerusalem, Jesus is met with a crowd of people shouting hosannas and waving palm branches. That event is commonly referred to as the triumphal entry; the event that sets into motion the final week of Jesus's life.

Our text today is happening very close to the end of Jesus's life and ministry on this earth. Jericho is just another one of the many towns Jesus and his disciples walked through, teaching and preaching.

But there is something different about their experience in Jericho as compared to the other places they visited. Jesus isn't stopping to teach or to tell parables. In fact, the only people we know that he talked to in Jericho were a blind man begging near the city and Zacchaeus.

Jesus's fame had spread to Jericho and a crowd was present to greet him when he came near the city. The crowd that greeted him would likely have wanted to extend hospitality to Jesus and his disciples; providing food and lodging for the night, as was customary for their culture. But the text quickly points out that Jesus was "passing through." This intention from Jesus to simply pass through is a signal to those in Jericho that he is not going to spend time with them. His goal is to keep moving; he will not spend the night or eat at the banquet they probably prepared in anticipation of his arrival.

The crowd is likely disappointed in this reality, but chooses to walk alongside Jesus for as long as they can, hoping to gain whatever wisdom they can during his short visit.

Verse two introduces us to Zacchaeus. "A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy."

As we may be aware from other stories throughout Scripture, tax collectors were not the most popular folks. Tax collectors were collaborators with the Roman Empire. They were Jews who made their living by collecting taxes from other Jews. Tax collectors would go around the community, collecting taxes from the residents, and send those taxes up the chain to Rome. But to make a living being a tax collector, you not only collected the taxes that were required, but you took a little more to pay your own salary. And some tax collectors made more than a living, building their wealth by taking far beyond what was required. By participating in this sort of work, a collector would quickly and maybe intentionally isolate themselves in their community.

It would have been bad enough that Zacchaeus was a tax collector. But he was a chief tax collector. This meant that he oversaw other tax collectors. He was a supervisor in this corrupt system. Having this distinction made him all the more despised.

The passage today also makes sure to point out to us that "...he was wealthy." By telling us he is a wealthy tax collector implies that he was really good at his job. If you can say that exploiting your neighbors to make a high wage is "good." This line of work certainly does not make Zacchaeus a popular or respected person among the people of Jericho. Zacchaeus is engaged in work that makes him despised by his Jewish neighbors. He is engaged in work that is dirty, underhanded, and hated. How ironic for Zacchaeus to be involved in such a nasty business. A man whose name in Hebrew means "clean; pure."

Although we can make a lot of assumptions about Zacchaeus based on his occupation and wealth, we catch a glimpse of his true character in verse 3: "He wanted to see who Jesus was..." Zacchaeus displays a genuine curiosity in the figure of Jesus. "...but being a short man, he could not, because of the crowd." There is the part of the story we already knew.

Verse four: "So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way." There are a few significant pieces of this verse that inform how we view and interpret this story. In

his book "Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes," Kenneth Bailey explores Middle Eastern social and cultural implications of actions throughout Scripture. His insights into the actions of Zacchaeus are particularly fascinating for me.

The first: "He ran ahead." Bailey shares that a Middle Eastern man at the time would never have been caught running. Being seen running in public would result in public shame. Why? Because to walk slowly and calmly would give off the desired air of superiority and being in control. Bailey also writes, "Furthermore, powerful, rich men do not climb trees." Both of the actions described in verse four show Zacchaeus' dedication to finding a way to see Jesus' pass by in spite of the possible embarrassment.

Zacchaeus climbed a sycamore-fig tree. The tree that Zacchaeus chose to climb is also an important detail in this story. The sycamore-fig is a tree with large, low branches, making it easy to climb. The tree has dense, broad leaves which make it easy to hide in. A piece of information that is also interesting about this tree is its presumed location. Sycamore-fig trees were only allowed to be planted outside of town. Due to the sprawling branches of the tree, they were required to be planted a certain distance from town so they would not interfere with any of the structures within the city walls. Additionally, this tree was considered unclean in the Jewish tradition. The tree served as a sort of tent for unclean ceremonial rituals; thus, making anything under its branches (or in the branches in this case) unclean.

So we know that Zacchaeus ran far enough ahead to make it some distance out of town and climbed a tree. Maybe Zacchaeus chose this particular tree based on his ability to hide behind those broad leaves, or maybe it was because its branches were low enough for a man of short stature to climb. Or maybe it was just because this tree was far enough away from the city of Jericho that (based on how much he was despised by the community) he was hoping that most of the crowd would have dissolved by that point. That would give him a better view of Jesus and help mitigate the risk of being seen by a larger crowd. Regardless of the motivation, we find Zacchaeus in the branches of a sycamore-fig tree as Jesus passes by.

"When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.'"

Let's back up to when Jesus first entered Jericho. It said that Jesus was "passing through." Remember that culturally, at the time, the people of Jericho would have wanted to extend hospitality to Jesus. And Jesus had intended to keep right on moving.

If the tree Zacchaeus climbed was outside the city, along the road that Jesus was walking, we can assume that Jesus has already passed through the city. His brief visit to Jericho has come to an end.

But Jesus stops and calls Zacchaeus out of the tree and invites himself to Zacchaeus's house. And it says that Zacchaeus came down and "welcomed him gladly." This is another glimpse into Zacchaeus's character. A person that would welcome Jesus gladly into his home couldn't be all bad...right?

But "all the people saw this and began to mutter, 'He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.'" Jesus had just politely refused the hospitality offered by the devout Jews in town and has now invited himself to Zacchaeus's house; likely to eat and lodge for the night. This man Zacchaeus, who has abused his community and his fellow Jews, is now going to play host to the messiah? Honestly, I might have grumbled a little bit too.

So Zacchaeus came down the tree and led Jesus to his home. He likely went about preparing a meal and making sure that his guest accommodations were prepared. Clean sheets on the bed, fresh towels laid out, and the Wi-Fi password prominently displayed. Well, maybe not that last one, but you know, all the things that you might do for unexpected overnight guests.

I imagine that the next verse picks up after the meal had been eaten and after they had sat together at the table for a bit.

Zacchaeus stood up and said to Jesus, "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."

We read this and don't think very carefully about what his declaration means. This was a bold claim for Zacchaeus to make. I have wondered to myself, what would Zacchaeus' financial consultant have said to him after making such a proclamation?

"Zach, as your financial consultant, I am here to help you make sure you are being smart about your finances and not making any rash emotional decisions that you may regret tomorrow. Now, tell me again what you want to do after your interaction with this traveling prophet."

"Zach, do you really think that liquidating and distributing half of your net worth is really a wise financial move? Sure, it wouldn't hurt you to make a few changes to your business practices so you can be viewed more positively in the community. But instead of giving away half of your assets, what about taking some of that money and moving it into a socially responsible invested portfolio? You can feel good about the work that your dollars are doing and still have access and control over the asset, should you ever need it."

"OK, if you don't want traditional investment portfolios, have you considered first putting a portion of your wealth into a Roth IRA to secure your future? Think about the lifestyle you want to live after you retire from tax collecting. What sort of income are you going to need to accomplish those retirement goals?"

"Have you considered the cost of long-term care? Before distributing your assets, you may want to purchase some long-term care insurance coverage to cover expenses if, sometime down the road, you would have to move into Jericho Manor."

"So, you're really set on giving away all that cash? Well Zach, perhaps instead of giving your money directly to the poor, you should funnel your dollars through a registered 501(c)3. Giving through the organization can help you capitalize on the charitable tax deduction; with your knowledge and experience with taxes I am sure you can see the benefit there."

I am not saying this to step on the toes of my colleagues at Everence who are financial consultants and have these sorts of conversations, because all these questions are good and important when considering your personal financial plan. I simply hope to illustrate how absolutely radical this proposition is. So radical that people would never think about doing this. It is not a smart thing to do. This decision is extremely costly for Zacchaeus. But Zacchaeus boldly declares his intention to Jesus.

And Jesus responds to him in verses 9 and 10 saying: "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

"Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham." Zacchaeus was a Jewish man but had been separated from his community because of the line of work he was in. He was an outcast, set apart from the rest of the community. But the words that Jesus speaks to him are words of restoration. Zacchaeus is a son of Abraham. This is of course a statement that applies to Zacchaeus's soul and his salvation, but it also is a statement that provides restoration of community for Zacchaeus. Jesus's statement means that Zacchaeus is not just another tax collector, another sinner, but that he is a "real Jew" again.

As we consider what this passage has to teach us about holistic stewardship, let's take a look together at the three characters in this story: Zacchaeus, Jesus, and the crowd.

The crowd: The crowd's greed for Jesus's attention blinded them to the grace that Jesus poured out on Zacchaeus. The crowd had the opportunity to be in the presence of the transformative power of Jesus's grace. But much like other crowds from the scriptures who considered themselves devout, they let their understanding of the way things "should be" separate them from the moment that was taking place right in front of them. They were too busy grumbling about Jesus spending his time with a sinner to recognize what was happening.

How often do we let ourselves become part of the crowd? How often do we let our understanding of the way things "should be" blind us from the powerful acts of love and grace that surround us every day? How often do we grumble?

We as believers should be actively searching for the moments of transformation that happen around us. We should resist the temptation to grumble. We should reframe our thinking to become more present in our own lives. We need to constantly work to open ourselves to witness Christ's transforming power that is at work in our homes, in our church, in our communities, and in our world.

In the world we live in today, it is easy to become discouraged. Our world is filled with violence and full of people drawing lines in the sand. It is tempting for me during troubling times, to hold tighter to MY "truth"; to close myself off to the world and to approach others with a spirit of skepticism and suspicion; shifting from open hands to closed fists.

But stewardship is about organizing my life in such a way that God can do the most with me. The call to holistic stewardship is one that invites us to turn from that skepticism and suspicion and embrace a posture of openness and a spirit of gratitude. It invites us to move from living lives with closed fists to lives of open hands.

This lesson is not only applicable to our personal journey, but to the journey of our communities. How do we as communities of faith walk alongside each other and model for each other what holistic stewardship looks like? The crowd in today's text gave us a great example of how NOT to do stewardship in community.

Jesus: In the middle of our story, Jesus offers costly love to Zacchaeus. If you walk through the story from the beginning, we can see that Zacchaeus was a person whom the crowd in Jericho didn't like. In verse five, Jesus shifts that hostility away from Zacchaeus and redirects it to himself. The people begin to mutter not because of Zacchaeus, they already didn't like him. They began muttering after Jesus's demonstration of love. Through inviting himself to the house of a sinner, Jesus takes the hostility of the

crowd upon himself. Through eating Zacchaeus's "unclean" food and staying in his "unclean" guest bed, Jesus offers to Zacchaeus a costly gift of love and acceptance.

How does Zacchaeus respond?

Zacchaeus: Zacchaeus offers costly love to others

It is love that motivates Zacchaeus to make his gift. He does not choose to give away half of his possessions because it's a smart financial move, or because it is expected of him, or even because it makes sense (because it doesn't). Zacchaeus responds to Jesus' gift in a radical way as an act of love and appreciation.

This response of radical love and appreciation through the giving of gifts is similar to the story we read back in the book of Exodus. Moses was helping organize the construction of the tabernacle and sent out a call for support to all the people. The response was so overwhelming that not long after their call had gone out for donations, Moses sends word out to the people saying that they are giving too much. It says in Exodus 36:6 that the people were restrained from bringing more...The people had such a desire to give that they had to be convinced not to bring more gifts. The people were so moved by love and appreciation that they couldn't contain their giving.

What would that be like? What would it be like for your pastors, your treasurer, to stand up and say "Church, stop! You are being too generous!"

These acts of love and the display of appreciation through the giving of gifts, goes beyond percentage calculations or deciphering where one can find indirect gain. It is an act of worship. It is about moving from closed fists to open hands.

That is the important lesson that we can learn from Zacchaeus. To let our actions and our gifts come from a place of genuine love. Granted, that love can at times be costly. It can inspire us to do things that might be seen as crazy. But if our actions or our gifts come from a place of love and appreciation, it doesn't matter if it's crazy.

After his encounter with Jesus, Zacchaeus gave in love and joy.

How will you respond to the costly love that Jesus has offered you?

Prayer of confession

God, be with us as we move along on our faith journey. Whether we are standing in the crowd, or hiding in a tree, send us your Spirit, so we might have wisdom in our daily walk. Give us the vision to see your transformative work that surrounds us each day. Help us to develop and share our gifts as good stewards, so we may use them in love and service in your Kingdom. Help us live more open handedly so you can do the most with us. We ask this through Christ our Lord, AMEN.

Responsive reading

ALL: Gracious God, give us generous hearts...
Leader: ...so we may fully appreciate all your many gifts to us.
ALL: Give us generous hearts...
Leader: ...so we may give without counting the cost.
ALL: Give us generous hearts...
Leader: ...so we may share without expecting something in return.
ALL: Give us generous hearts...
Leader: ... so we may know the joy that comes from helping others.
ALL: Give us generous hearts...
Leader: ...so we may share all that you have given us.
ALL: Give us generous hearts...
Leader: ...so we may hold all our treasures in an open hand.
ALL: Give us generous hearts...
Leader: ...so we may recognize the many blessings in each new day.
ALL: Give us generous hearts...
Leader: ...so we may learn the difference between what we need and what we want.
ALL: Give us generous hearts...
Leader: ...so we may ever thank you and serve you.
ALL: Give us generous hearts...
Leader: Lord, we ask all of this, knowing that you will always give us all that we need.
Please bless the work we do for you this night and always.
ALL: Amen

—Adapted “*Litany of Generosity*” from *Stewardship: Spirituality for Living*

Hymn

Offering

Prayer

Hymn

Dearest Lord, as we go
teach us to be generous.
teach us to serve you as you deserve.
to give and not to count the cost,
to toil and not to seek for rest,
to labor and not to ask for reward
save that of knowing we are doing your will.

—Adapted from a *Prayer for Generosity* by Saint Ignatius



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