

“Our Hearts Answer First”
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[Jesus] entered Jericho and was passing through it. ² A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³ He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. ⁵ When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” ⁶ So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. ⁷ All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” ⁸ Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.” ⁹ Then Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.” *Luke 19:1-10*

Jesus is walking to Jericho when he encounters a blind man, calling out to him. He asks what the man wants. “I want to see.” Jesus heals him and continues on into the city. In Jericho is another man. This man wants to see... Jesus.

Zacchaeus. The chief tax collector. Rich. Emphasis on the last word. Rich people don't generally fare well in Luke's gospel account so if we were hearing this story for the first time, we might expect it to turn out differently.

Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus so badly that he gives no thought to what he does or what people will think. With singular intent, he runs ahead of the crowd and climbs a tree. Both the running and the climbing shout, Undignified! Ridiculous! But he wants to see Jesus that much.

Jesus approaches the tree and looks up. “Zacchaeus, hurry down! I must stay at your house today.”

His words convey a sense of urgency. *Hurry* down. *I must* stay at your house *today*. Why the urgency? This is late in Jesus' ministry. Jerusalem and what we call Holy Week are not far ahead. Jesus knows that his time is limited yet he continues his ministry to the last – his task, as always, to proclaim the good news about God's kin-dom building.

God has already been working on Zacchaeus' heart, priming him to be ready for Jesus' words. In Methodist-speak, we call this “prevenient grace.” So Zacchaeus is eager and ready when Jesus calls to him. He's delighted to welcome Jesus into his home. Full of good will, he promises to repay fourfold any person that he has defrauded.

Early OT writers recorded that if a stolen animal was found alive, the thief was to pay the owner double. If the animal was slaughtered and sold, the payment was four or five times the animal's value. Later, it was suggested that if a person confessed they could avoid this.

Likely, Zacchaeus knows this law. He doesn't need to say he'll repay people times four. But in his excitement at being accepted and welcomed by Jesus, he commits to go above and beyond what might be expected.

Not that you've ever defrauded anyone, but how does this compare with what you do in your own life?

Since it's November, you probably won't be surprised that today we're going to talk about our own giving.

When I spoke last week about my experiences in Palestine, I mentioned that hope is really about relationships. But hope is not the only thing tied to relationships. Life itself is about relationships. And by extension, so are generosity and stewardship. They're about our relationships with God and with each other.

Of course, stewardship and generosity are not only about money – you've heard this many times from the pulpit – but they are about money. We cannot be good stewards of God's gifts to us if we don't address money as part of the big picture. And we can only become truly generous when we also include money in our accounting.

Just as the bible offers standards for compensating a person you may have wronged, the bible also includes a target of giving called the tithe. This standard of giving ten percent is designed to help us put God first in our lives – because God knows that putting and keeping God first does not come easily or naturally. This standard of tithing is about helping us get God and everything else in proper perspective.

In Psalm 24, we read that “All that we are and all that we have are gifts from God.” Our giving, our stewardship of our money and everything else is a measure of our response to that gift.

Would you take your bulletin, find a largish white space and draw as big a circle, or blob, as you can. Inside that circle draw another slightly smaller one. Okay?

This outer circle represents the people who come to church – regularly or once in a while – and when asked about giving, they say, “Who me?” The next circle is the people who ask, “What's my fair share?”

There's nothing wrong with being in either of these two places if they represent where your faith is right now. It's important that you understand this. Yet we are expected to grow in our faith and as your faith grows deeper your questions change. So let's draw two more circles, so that you have four circles, one inside the other.

Where someone in the second circle might ask, “What's my share?” a person in the third circle asks themselves, “How much should I give?” They want to put God first, but that can be hard, right? The fourth circle represents the people who ask themselves, “How can I say thanks?”

No one can tell you which circle you should be in or that where you are isn't right for you right now. And yet, we are each called to grow in our discipleship, and that includes growing in the way we use the gifts that God gives us.

Back for just a moment to the words Jesus calls up to Zacchaeus. When he says, “Come down,” do you remember when he says he's coming to Zacchaeus' house?

Right, today. The Good News is that God is doing God's great thing – today. Now is the time of reconciliation. Now is the time of hope. Now is the time to open our eyes to what God is doing all around us.

This week hold onto this idea. God is always working in the present moment. And when even one person finds wholeness or hears a word of affirmation or resolves to live by a new set of values or begins to believe that life can be different, God's kin-dom is being built.

We support God's kin-dom building work by what we do and what we give and who we are. Do you hear that? God trusts *us* with God's kin-dom building work! Indeed God can't do it without us. It's a huge and sometimes scary responsibility but it's also an amazing honor and joy.

Amen.