

Luke 19:1-10

364 Days of Thanksgiving, November 13, 2016

Theme: Overwhelming Gratitude Leads to Overwhelming Generosity

INJ We are blessed to live in a constitutional republic. Our nation is organized so that citizens can participate in the selection of those who govern. We have just witnessed an unusual election. I think it is fair to say that there is much uncertainty about what comes next.

If we had lived in the time of Jesus, we would have had greater fears. The Roman government imposed itself on less powerful people. The Jewish nation reluctantly accepted foreign rulers and the force of their soldiers. None had the assurance of fairness or impartiality or even safety.

The Romans taxed those they subjected. To add to that insult, they chose local citizens to be tax collectors. So if you agreed to be a tax collector, right from the beginning people would hate you because you were a traitor to Israel. Even worse, you were seen as turning away from the true God by collecting money for the pagan Roman emperor.

The way the Romans collected their taxes was by contracting with the tax collector for a certain amount to give to the government. Anything the tax collector could get above and beyond that, he could keep. As an added benefit, he could have Roman soldiers stand by to intimidate his prey!

You can see how tax collectors could become extremely wealthy. Most were corrupt politicians. They cheated the people. They were traitors. They were the scum of society. We might think of people who scam money from the elderly; or who build a Ponzi scheme to make themselves rich; or who manipulate government contracts for personal gain. Tax collectors in Jesus' day were considered the worst of sinners. Everybody despised them.

Understanding the Roman system of tax collection will help you understand our lesson today. We look in on Jesus about seven days before his death. He was walking with thousands of pilgrims who were headed up to Jerusalem from Galilee for the Feast of the Passover. The last big city through which they would pass before arriving in Jerusalem was Jericho, the City of Palms. Located in a lush valley about six miles from the Jordan River and the Dead Sea, Jericho was a tropical paradise filled with luscious vegetation and towering trees.

The custom in those days was that, as the pilgrims went through a town on their way to Jerusalem, the people from that town would gather along the streets and cheer on their brothers and sisters. It was a parade.

Now, the people of Jericho heard that Jesus, the great prophet from

Nazareth, was coming. The whole city flooded the streets. Curious onlookers came to see the man who some said was the Messiah. If you looked around, you would probably see mothers lifting up their young children, hoping to catch a glimpse of and maybe be blessed by the great prophet. Can't you just hear the chatter? "Will he do a miracle? Will he stop in Jericho or keep going to Jerusalem (which was only six hours away)? If he stays here, whose house will he stay in? Will it be one of the chief priests or the elders of the city?"

That's when we meet Zacchaeus. The name Zacchaeus in Hebrew means "just" or "pure." Zacchaeus, however, was anything but just or pure. He was the chief tax collector of the district—the top of a corrupt pyramid. If he was what most tax collectors were, he was a crook.

Now, Zacchaeus had heard about Jesus. He wondered about Jesus. He wanted to see him, but he had a problem. You see, Zacchaeus was vertically challenged. He was short. He couldn't see over the crowds. But, Jericho was the City of Palms. The road was lined with all kinds of different trees. Zacchaeus ran ahead and climbed a sycamore fig tree so he could see. We can imagine that, with the size of the crowd, he probably wasn't the only one in the trees trying to get a view of Jesus.

When Jesus came to Zacchaeus' tree, though, he stopped, looked up, and said, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." Jesus was going to spend the night in Jericho, not with a respected dignitary, but at the house of the chief tax collector! People went nuts. They couldn't believe it. "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner" they said, as their noses went up and their eyes looked down.

We aren't told what Jesus talked about with Zacchaeus when they got to his house, but surely he talked about sin and forgiveness. They discussed how much tax collector Zacchaeus needed a Savior! And that Jesus had come to save sinners—even sinners of the magnitude of Zacchaeus. I am sure Jesus talked about these things because Jesus regularly talked about these things with everyone.

We see the result of what Jesus said about sin and forgiveness. Zacchaeus stood up and announced: "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." Zacchaeus rejoiced that Jesus had forgiven his sin. He was ecstatic that God would have mercy on him! So he gave half his wealth to the poor and then used the other half to pay back everybody he had wronged. God's uncommon mercy led to Zacchaeus' uncommon gratitude. Then we should notice that overwhelming gratitude is more than just words. Overwhelming gratitude

leads to overwhelming generosity.

After Zacchaeus spoke, Jesus said something which probably shocked and amazed the people more: “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham.” Wait a minute! This was a traitor to Israel and the true God—a corrupt politician, a thief—how could he be considered a son of Abraham, a member of the family of believers? We have to remember God’s uncommon mercy. Jesus, the Son of Man, “came to seek and to save the lost.”

Those words echo even more loudly when we remember that only seven days later this same Jesus, the Son of Man, would rescue the world by accomplishing salvation on the cross. He would be beaten and bloodied, nailed to the wood, and forsaken by his heavenly Father on Calvary. By his death, Jesus brought lost sinners into his family. Sinners went from being outcasts to being Abraham’s children, part of the family of God. Jesus promised Zacchaeus salvation. He has given it to us by the cross!

“The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” The people of Jericho struggled to accept God’s uncommon mercy. They were endlessly horrified because Jesus spent time with prostitutes and tax collectors and lowlifes. The Pharisees, Jesus’ enemies who put him to death, didn’t recognize his mercy. If he was so holy, if Jesus was from God, how could he wallow with those sinners? They lifted up their noses and looked down on those whom they considered unworthy of God’s love.

Sadly, each of us has a little Pharisee in our hearts. Our noses go up so easily and our eyes look down so quickly as we see the sinners out there in the world—the corrupt politicians who are running our country, the drug dealers and drug users who are a blight on our society, the husbands who hit their wives and wives who cheat on their husbands. Our little Pharisee even looks down on those sinners sitting next to us in church.

In polite conversation we will say we don’t think we are any better than they are, but deep down in our hearts, our little Pharisees sit back in comfortable chairs saying, “I’m so glad I’m not like them.”

What we so often forget, what we so often fail to see is that the Son of Man came to seek and to save each one of us. I was lost. You were lost – separated from God by pride, anger, lust, and laziness. We were lost for eternity in hell. Hiding in our tree surrounded by the crowds, we don’t even know how lost we are and how much we need Jesus.

Jesus came to seek and to save you, the lost one. He practiced purity by never cheating or stealing, by never welling up in selfish pride, and by never giving in to unrighteous anger, lust, or laziness. As he hung with his back pressed against the cross, he allowed himself to suffer God’s righteous

wrath that we, the lost scum of society, deserve. Because he hung on the tree, we are forgiven. He tells us to come down from our self-righteous and sinful tree. He called us by name in Baptism. God has come to stay with us by his gospel word. He proclaims to us his mercy. He gives the uncommon gift of free forgiveness and a home in heaven.

That heavenly home has been realized by four members of St. Luke’s this past year. Our Savior brought them to faith and kept them close by Word and Sacrament. Jesus took them from this vale of tears to himself in heaven. We remember Teresa Greenwood, Rose Clinesmith, Carol Baker-Kralik, and Coral Bender. They were all sinners, but, like Zacchaeus, they were redeemed by Jesus. Now they rest in the presence of the Lord.

When we understand how sinful we are and how loving our God is—when we truly appreciate what it means when Jesus says, “I forgive you”—then we react as Zacchaeus did. Zacchaeus couldn’t contain himself. He had finally found what money couldn’t buy. He had found peace and hope. He gave away a large amount of his money in thanks and praise to God. Overwhelming gratitude leads to overwhelming generosity.

My friends, the secret to overwhelming gratitude—the secret to the joy that Zacchaeus found—is opening our eyes and recognizing the amazing things God has done for us. The secret to overwhelming gratitude is understanding that we don’t deserve any of it.

God has been overwhelmingly generous with you. Start with recognizing how much Jesus gave you by bringing his forgiving love that changed you from being lost to being found. You were condemned but now you are a redeemed child of God. Then you can recognize how much Jesus gives you as he cares for your every need. Even with the political turmoil of this past week, God has not stopped being overwhelmingly generous! Look around you at your home and cars, your family and friends. Look at the food you eat and the air you breathe. Look at your church family, the freedom you have to worship God and learn his Word. Like Zacchaeus, you haven’t earned any of it. You don’t deserve it. You are not better than anyone else. Yet God has been overwhelmingly generous with you.

Now you – we all – get to respond to God with overwhelming gratitude. We respond with overwhelming generosity. Like Zacchaeus, we want to give thanks to God generously. As we give from a thankful heart, God promises to bless us. We can be overwhelmingly generous with our family and friends. We can be overwhelmingly generous here at church, and even with strangers! God has given his overwhelming grace to us. Poor, vertically challenged Zacchaeus gives us a great example: overwhelming gratitude leads to overwhelming generosity. SDG Amen.