

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

October 24, 2010 Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 19:1-10

Pentecost 22

From Greedy to Generous

Today we begin thinking about Stewardship – and I have good news for you! Let me read you this email I got on Tuesday here at church.

Dear Friend,

Greetings! I know this email will come to you as a surprise because you did not know me. I am Mr. Michael Taylor, son of former Liberian president, Charles Taylor. My family and I are in exile over my father's Inheritance funds with the Liberian government while my father is facing a trial by international court of justice, the Hague, Netherlands.

I have (\$10.5,000,000.00 USD) all in 100-dollar bills in a safe Security Company that was deposited as Family valuables which my father has asked me to take care of. I want to ship this fund to your country through a diplomat as my job is to find a good partner that we can trust and that will assist me; Can I trust you? When you receive this letter kindly send me an e-mail signifying your interest including your most confidential telephone/fax numbers and your home address where the consignment will be deliver across to you.

My aim of bringing this fund to your country is for safety and investment purposes in a real estate business which will profit both of us. All I need is your assistance and trust so that you will help me clear this fund and receive it when the diplomat arrives in your country. I have set aside 40% of this fund for you while 60% will be kept for me until I come over. Let me know and please treat this information as very confidential.

Yours sincerely,

Mr. Michael Taylor

Well, I don't know – Why would the Liberian president's son send us money. But then I got this email on Thursday:

Hi,

My name's Elizabeth Willoughby my maiden name is Elizabeth Hookes, I am 68 years old, I live in England. I am old and have a heart condition; I will be leaving this earth soon. I have shared most of my things to charity, the Red Cross, and some churches but I have this one that I want to give out too. I was working on claiming some money that is mine from a bank in the Netherlands. Now I want you to claim it and use it to help the needy while you help yourself too.

Because you have considered to read this email, I feel you I can entrust the funds in you. So I want you to receive the money personally. I am hereby giving it to you, and not demanding anything from you. I think you are the kind of person who should have it because I want you to use it to help the needy. I will have my lawyer assist you if you need any legal backup.

You are to keep half of the money to yourself and the remaining half will be given to charity with the help of my lawyer. Remember the poor and always maintain a generous heart. If you feel you are kind enough to do this for the needy with trust and without fear, reply me and I will tell you how to contact my lawyer.

*With warm regards,
Mrs. Elizabeth*

Yeah right!

I wonder if that's how the people responded to Zaccheaus, the crook of a tax-collector, when he announced that he was paying people back that he had cheated 400%! Yeah right!

We know that the letters we all receive by email declaring large sums of money will be ours if we only respond... are a hoax. But not Zacchaeus.

Something really happened that changed him from greedy to generous.

And the change was dramatic. You see Zaccheaus was a tax collector. But in those days being a tax collector was not the equivalent of being an IRS agent today. Tax collectors were notoriously dishonest. They would extract far more than people really owed the government so they themselves could become super rich.

And in true Jesus form – he wants to have dinner with a sinner, and so he invites himself to Zacchaeus' home. And, of course, those in the crowd were shocked at this..

So off they go Zacchaeus' house. And here's where I get a little frustrated with the story. Because we don't hear one word of what Jesus said to Zacchaeus while they were in the house together.

Don't you want to know what Jesus said to him there in that house? If only we knew what Jesus said, then perhaps we could say similar things to each other, and we too would be changed and become equally generous. Maybe our giving would increase by 400%!

But we don't know. So after a time Zacchaeus came out of his house and addressed the crowd. "I apologize to you folks. I have been cheating you for years now. You know it and so do I. I have been a cad, taking advantage of my position. I've gotten richer at your expense. I apologize; and to make it right, I will pay back each one of you from whom I have stolen. In fact, I will repay you back four times the amount I cheated you. Not only that, but, I am also giving half of my goods to the poor of our city."

I don't know that we can imagine how shocked the crowds must have been hearing this. Imagine Bernie Madoff getting out of prison and promising to pay back 4 times what people lost. "Sure, Bernie, sure, Zacchaeus, we'll believe it when we see it. The Old Testament law is clear; you need to repay us what you stole from us plus 20%; but you say you are going to repay 400%? What's the gimmick, Zacchaeus? What's the trick?"

Well, no trick – it's just Zacchaeus - a short little man who climbed a sycamore tree in order to see Jesus, a man who was transformed from greedy to generous, from selfish to selfless, from a thieving heart to a thanksgiving heart.

So what could Jesus have said to him that caused this change? Well, while it would be nice to know, I suspect it was something rather simple. Whatever it was, I think the crux of the message was that Jesus loved Zacchaeus, even though he was the biggest sinner in town. Jesus loved him, and in that love, Zacchaeus was transformed.

And the same is true for us. Even when you and I are at our sinful worst, Jesus continues to love us also. And, simply put, Jesus' love changes us.

After all, Zacchaeus was changed, from being greedy to generous, from selfish to selfless, Remember Zacchaeus only had to pay back what he stole plus 20%; but he insisted on paying them back 400%. He didn't have to, but he wanted to. 400%!!! And then he volunteered to give 50% of his goods away to the poor!!! 50%!!! Again, he didn't have to; he wanted to. He is a changed man!

Because, Jesus didn't simply go into Zacchaeus' house that day. Rather, Jesus went into Zacchaeus' ... heart ... that day. That's what changed him. No one is ever changed to be a generous person unless Jesus gets into your heart. The exact words do not matter; but Jesus in your heart does matter. It is his presence, not any special words, that changes us. When the Spirit is right, any words will do.

When you welcome him you are changed. Here we have the reverse of the grand welcome of Jesus into Jerusalem, and maybe the source of the unbelievable welcome, Zacchaeus welcoming Jesus into his home. When you welcome Jesus; your life is changed. Confidence in the life changing power of the "body of Christ" is critical for any hope that "we will bear the fruits of repentance."

A pastor friend of mine says that to welcome Jesus is a dangerous act and that maybe we should post at our church door

"Beware all you enter; you may leave with a lot less money." (Herb Davis)

Also it is interesting that Zacchaeus' grand welcome of Jesus is not a private thing. Salvation comes to his house. While we often talk about a personal relationship to Jesus Christ we don't mean a private relationship, that has no social or economic or community impact. There are no private relationships with Jesus. When we welcome Jesus' salvation, healing comes to our household, our community, our economics.

That's why on Pledge Sunday, we'll bring our commitments (pledge cards) forward and put them in a box up front here. And why the weekly offering is such an important part of our worship. I've heard of churches that have removed the offering from worship and instead have baskets at the doorway for people to us as they enter or leave the sanctuary. That seems odd to me.

I have a friend from Ghana. And I remember a conversation we once had about the offering in our churches. He told me about how different it is in churches in Ghana. There, people don't wait for the plates to be passed to them. They literally get up and dance their way to the front, eager to bring any gift they can to the God who has given them life. The offering portion of the service has been known to last an hour. He says he misses that here; that churches here don't seem to enjoy the offering, and it puzzles him.

Some churches make the connection between God's love for us and our giving to him by having the communion elements – the bread and the juice – brought forward when the offering plates are brought forward, so that they can remember that when God gives, God gives everything...broken body, shed blood.

God is a generous, abundant giver, and it is that giving that we are called to emulate as disciples – those who try to become more like Jesus. Disciples after all, do what the teacher does, and in this case the teacher, Jesus, gives.

Here, in our church, the offering comes after the sermon to show that our offering of money is a response to the Word of God. It is a response to the Good News proclaimed to us that God loves us so much that He would go so far as to become human...to live and die as one of us...in order to win our love. We love because God first loved us. We give because God first gave to us.

One of the most spectacular diamonds in the world is the Koh-i-noor diamond. Queen Victoria received it as a gift from a maharajah when he was just a child. The story goes that later as a grown man this same maharajah visited Queen Victoria again. He requested that the stone be brought from the Tower of London to Buckingham Palace, where he was to meet with the Queen.

The maharajah took the diamond and, kneeling before the Queen, gave it back to her, saying, "Your Majesty, I gave you this jewel when I was a child, too young to know what I was doing. Now I want to give it to you again in the fullness of my strength, with all of my heart and affection, and gratitude, now and forever, fully realizing all that I do."

As followers of Jesus Christ, we need to reiterate those words offering again our lives to him: "I want to give You back my life, Lord Jesus, I want to give it again to You with gratitude, fully cognizant of all that I am doing."

So like Zacchaeus, we invite Jesus into our homes and he ends up in our hearts. And hopefully we'll spend the next 3 weeks with Jesus in our hearts so that on Nov. 14th we'll emerge from our houses and bring our promises to church declaring our generosity as we give back to God what he has given us. Who knows maybe we'll even dance with joy as well.

Amen.