

“For the Joy, Pleasure, and Satisfaction That Is First Christian Church”

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Text: Luke 19:1-10

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Zacchaeus was short of stature. But as was said of St. Francis of Assisi, where he stopped physically, he was just getting underway. Something similar might be said of Zacchaeus – he obviously was a dime among nickels. Bound and determined to see Jesus, he ran ahead of the crowd blocking his view, found a sycamore tree, and scrambled up it. Literally and figuratively, he stood above the crowd. And Jesus, who never missed a thing, spied him up there and called out, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.”

That, of course, is what Jesus says to all of us who come to see Him. But not all who come to see, come to receive. Some would like nothing better than to take out permanent membership in the association of life’s bystanders. Not Zacchaeus, however. He hurried down and was happy to welcome him – according to the Revised Standard Version – “received him joyfully.”

Joyfully – full of joy – joy of course stems from appreciation. You can’t enjoy what you don’t appreciate. Zacchaeus appreciated what Jesus meant to him, as did Mary, the sister of Lazarus, who anointed Jesus with perfume and wiped His feet with her hair; as did the woman in the house of Simon the leper, who poured an alabaster flask of very expensive ointment on Jesus’ head. They did not take Him for granted. They appreciated Jesus, who went into the homes of the soul-sick like Zacchaeus, and of Simon the leper, leprosy being in those days a shameful and isolating disease.

This morning I want to ask how deeply we appreciate the church and our church family. Do we do anything for the church, the body of Christ, comparable to Mary’s wiping Jesus’ feet with her hair, comparable to the woman’s pouring expensive ointment on Jesus’ head? Do we just “go to church,” or do we receive the church joyfully in our hearts?

Zacchaeus, we’re told, stood – he stood and appreciated the importance of the moment and of what he was going to say. He stood – but he did not say, “Look, Lord, I am now going to go regularly on retreats, read scripture daily, and have a rich prayer life” – important as those things are. He didn’t say that. He rose and said what? He said, “Look, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor.” Now Zacchaeus was very rich, and I assume that he appreciated not only Jesus, but all that he was about to give away. We should never sacrifice without appreciating deeply the value of what we are sacrificing – otherwise, our giving is not sacrificial. In other words, we should appreciate not only the church, but all the non-church-related things in our lives that give us such pleasure – family, eating out, movies, trips, vacations, nice clothes, concerts and theater, sports, and hobbies.

Then, as wisely suggested by a church member, we should tally up as best we can what we spend on those pleasures and compare that sum to what we give for the joy, pleasure, and satisfaction that is First Christian Church. The result is predictable – most of us will be shocked and ashamed, which is a sign of good spiritual health. At that point we will be in a position to negotiate with ourselves, to decide how much we want to decrease one sum in order to increase the other.

Now Zacchaeus decided to even up the two sums, to split what he had 50/50 – he says, “half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor.” Now either I am not as rich, or have more dependents, or am not as good a Christian – probably all three – because for the past several years, Holly and I have given to God, through this church only ten percent of our income. We have not always been tithers – in fact, up until I began serving a church full-time, I don’t ever recall even signing a pledge card – growing up in my home church, or while I was in college. As I told you in a sermon last summer, when I was in seminary I served on the General Board of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Bob Bacon, a member of Park Place Christian Church in Hutchinson, was also on the Board at that time. One day in one of our meetings, Bob made some comments about giving to God through the church, and how much joy he received from tithing – that if we weren’t tithing, we should make it our goal. Now I don’t remember the specific words he used, but 27 years later I still recall the feeling that a light had come on. I’d had an AH-HAH experience – God had used a layperson from the farm to teach a ministerial student from the city about stewardship. From that day forward, tithing became a goal for Holly and me – and we did not reach that goal overnight, nor did we reach that goal without some struggle.

I'm certain there are persons here today who are stepping out in faith and are seeking to move toward being tithers and who find it difficult – I want to commend you for your giving and remind you that a tithe is a goal, not a floor – in other words while you work toward a tithe, giving less than ten percent certainly does not make one less Christian or less faithful. Our situations and financial demands are different. Ten percent is not a floor – but neither is it a ceiling. And to those of you who already give ten percent of your income to God through the church, I would also commend you for your giving, and suggest that there is still room for you to grow, too. After all, Zacchaeus wrote fifty percent on his pledge card. The decision is eminently yours to make, whatever the percentage. I would only remind us of the story that comes two chapters later in Luke – Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury and He saw a poor widow put in two copper coins. And He said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them – for they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all the living she had.” In other words, what counts is not how much you give, but how much is left after you give.

We return to Zacchaeus, he did all this joyfully. He received Jesus gladly, and when he stood to announce his intention to give half of his goods to the poor, I assume he did not do so with a long face and in a choking voice. No, he gave as joyfully as he received. And he did so because he knew that to give is not to give up, but to gain. Those who lose their lives will find them. Remember that Jesus didn't tell Zacchaeus to give half of his possessions to the poor – Zacchaeus responded spontaneously out of gratitude. He chose to give because he was grateful. He gave generously – joyfully – out of love. All he had to hear were the words, “Zacchaeus – I'm coming to your place” and Zacchaeus opened his life to Jesus – his love – his heart – his checkbook.

Ever thought about why we give to others? Not just money, but of ourselves. Why do we give of ourselves to our spouses, children, parents, brothers, and sisters? While we often receive a good feeling from giving – that's not why we give. We give because we love. It's that simple. Our giving to family, friends, church, to God is a response of gratitude – because we love. We give because we love, when we love we give.

You see, love is not solely a transaction of the heart. A heart full of love responds with hands full of gratitude. Let me repeat that. A heart full of love responds with hands full of gratitude. Love bears fruit. One of the ways in which our love of God and of Christ's church bears fruit is through financial stewardship.

C. William Nichols – former General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) said, “Stewardship isn't the church's way of raising Christians.” Nichols' words reflect my own theology – that's why you're not hearing me tell you about underwriting a budget. The budget for 2008 is being developed and that discussion will come later. We will all have an opportunity in the next month or so to consider the proposed budget and see if it is one we are willing to embrace and support. It no doubt will be a budget that reflects an expanding ministry and outreach, for maintaining the status quo simply is not an option, nor will it be necessary if we will respond out of gratitude for the blessings God has given us.

You're aware that the focus of our stewardship emphasis is “I have called you friends.” And it is entirely appropriate that today has been designated as Homecoming Sunday. This is a day to celebrate that we are brothers and sisters in Christ – that we are family. That this sanctuary is the house where we gather – to experience Christ-like compassion – to be recipients of that compassion and to extend that compassion to others.

I believe each of us is here today because of our love for God – for Christ – and for Christ's church. And if we took time today to ask the question, what do you love about this congregation – what do you appreciate about this particular part of the body of Christ? What is it about this church that brings joy to your life? We would get a variety of answers. When I was visiting on Monday with Christy Dew, our candidate for the Associate Pastor position, she asked me what was my greatest joy serving this congregation – I said “the people.”

I believe all of us want to support what we love. We want to be generous. If, like Zacchaeus, we have joyfully received Jesus, we want as joyfully to follow Zacchaeus' example in giving. Like him, in appreciation of the importance of our faith and of the significance of our estimate of giving, we, the members and friends of First Christian Church, will in two weeks be invited to rise, as did Zacchaeus. I am confident that when we do rise, we will feel some of that sense of incredible satisfaction that must have filled Zacchaeus when he rose to say: “Look, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor.” And may salvation come to our houses also.

This sermon is an adaptation of a sermon delivered by William Sloane Coffin in 1987.