

Sunday after Pentecost [Proper 26C]
November 10, 2019
Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD
Readings: Psalm 46; Luke 19: 1-10

Grace and peace to you from God --- Father-Son-Holy Spirit. Amen

A man on a vacation was strolling outside his hotel in Acapulco, enjoying the sunny Mexican weather. He heard the screams of a woman kneeling in front of a child. He knew enough Spanish to determine that the boy had swallowed a coin. Seizing the child by the heels, the man held him up, gave him a few shakes, and an American quarter dropped to the sidewalk. “Oh, thank you sir!” cried the woman, “You seemed to know just how to get the coin out of him. Are you a doctor?” “No, ma’am,” replied the man, “I’m with the United States Internal Revenue Service.”¹

This was what the people of Jericho thought of Zacchaeus. He and the tax collectors he oversaw seemed to be “shake down” guys, intent on getting the last quarter out of them. The Romans were no fools. They left the dirty work of collecting taxes to collaborating locals — like Zacchaeus — who knew the area, the people, their circumstances. His Jewish neighbors considered Zacchaeus a traitor to be working for the Romans. They also saw him as greedy and self-serving. The tax money collected beyond the Roman requirements went into the pockets of the tax collectors. Since Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector, was rich, it seemed he was collecting well beyond a reasonable fee for his service. So this man, who may have been short in stature, stood looming over others with the power and influence his wealth and position afforded him. Zacchaeus was a taker, apparently unconcerned or oblivious to the needs and suffering of those around him. How does one become that way?

Karen Kretschmn came to the Washington Co. Lutheran Conference meeting last Thursday. Karin is the Associate for Generosity in our synod, and she challenged us clergy. She remarked that we are not good at talking about money. In the church we only seem to talk about money at budget time or a commitment sundays . . . when there are a shortfall or building projects. We aren’t good at talking about our relationship with money and the use of money as a faith response. Karen used this very gospel reading with us. How did Zacchaeus’s relationship with money change after meeting Jesus? One pastor said, “When Jesus forgives and we repent, we can’t go back to way we were.

Living with Jesus changes' us." Another pastor remarked, "Meeting Jesus changed Zacchaeus from being a taker to being a giver." Karen asked us to consider the families in which our own personal attitudes about money began. That sent me thinking.

I grew up in a solid middle class home. I knew we were not rich but I never felt deprived or insecure. That in itself was a blessing. My parents did not have a checking account or credit card when I was young. My mother would cash my father's check and distribute it among these envelopes with clear labels — mortgage, gas & electric, insurance, church offering, food, gasoline and so forth. She and my dad were good at living within their means. If they wanted or needed something, they saved for it.

My first handling of money happened because of the ice cream man. A man in a Good Humor ice cream truck would come ringing bells into our neighborhood. Kids ran off home to ask for money — I and my sister included. My parents eventually decided this was the chance to teach us about money. We were given 75 cents every two weeks. That would be it for ice cream man money. We could use it however we wished. Which meant we could blow the whole amount on one really expensive good humor ice cream and get nothing else for two weeks or we could stretch it out or we could use it for something else. It worked. When we were a bit older, that money became an allowance for which we did certain jobs around the house and yard. Again, it was ours to spend on what we wanted and ours to save for anything special we wanted.

Up to this point, money was used to get what I could afford and want. It was a means to teach responsibility and delayed gratification. But somehow through the Holy Spirit, I had a Zacchaeus encounter with money. I don't remember where my sister and I got this idea or how we, usually sworn enemies, came to work together, but we saved to buy my mother a Christmas gift — a nativity set. It was the very first gift I ever helped to pay for with my own money. My father helped us order it from Montgomery Wards. I'm sure he probably added money to our savings. He took us in secret to pick it up at the catalog department in the big Montgomery Wards in Baltimore City. We wrapped it and waited. The whole venture was so exciting. My mother was totally surprised (as far as we knew) and cried just like she did at Hallmark commercials. Each Christmas she would put a piece of green felt on top of the big TV console and place on it the barn, a

bit of straw and all the nativity figures. Of all the memories I have of Christmas as a child, that excitement of buying a Christmas gift for my mother and the thrill of seeing her joy is the best.

I know there are many other people and experiences that shaped my attitude and habits about money but I see where they began. I first learned money as a gift from those who loved me. Later I learned it was something I would need to earn. I learned that I had to think carefully and plan how to best use money, discerning between want and need. And then there was one of those glorious lessons no one but the Lord could have orchestrated — I learned the pure joy of giving... the goodness of giving gifts and helping others that still makes my heart sing more than any possession I could own.

We don't get any idea of how Zacchaeus came to his attitudes about money. What we are told is that he crawled up a tree to see the latest celebrity named Jesus. He came down at Jesus' direction. Instead of being chastised or condemned, Zacchaeus was confronted with acceptance and grace, "I MUST come to your stay at your house today," Jesus said. Despite the grumbling of those who thought Jesus a fraud, impure or mad for going to the house of a sinner, Jesus steps over preconceptions, prejudices, envy, hatred and sin to bring salvation to Zacchaeus and his household. It was an epiphany experience for this chief tax collector. Once he knew the love and acceptance of Jesus, Zacchaeus's attitude toward money and the people around him was forever changed. People didn't exist for his own gain. Money was a tool to be used not just for himself but for the betterment of his community and those in need. In other words, as Zacchaeus walked with Jesus, he began to see that you cannot separate faith in Jesus from how you treat people or spend your money.

So here's your assignment for the week. First, what is your relationship with money— where did it start and what experiences shaped how you relate to money? Is money a god or a tool? Secondly, how is your use of money influenced by your faith? When Zacchaeus experienced the generosity of Jesus — his acceptance, welcome, forgiveness — what happened then? Well, to parody the wise Dr. Seuss:

*In Jericho they say, that Zacchaeus' small heart grew three sizes that day!
And the minute his heart didn't feel quite so tight,*

the poor and the cheated came into his sight.

And he gave back all his ill-gotten gain! He'd help the poor and the least!

*And Zacchaeus himself had joy that never ceased!*²

Zacchaeus collided with the freely given, unearned, unconditional grace of God and he could no longer separate how he got his money and what he did with his money from his love of God. Out of gratitude for God's generosity toward him, Zacchaeus discovered a joy in generosity, that would surely extend beyond money to other kindnesses, too. How about us? May our hearts grow three sizes each time we come receive the gift of Jesus at the communion rail or experience a kindness. Let us, too, grow in the pure joy of generosity, freed from being money's captive to using our resources as a faith response to our abundantly generous Lord. Amen

Linda M Alessandri 11/9/19

ENDNOTES

1. Brett Blair, www.eSermons.com

2. A parody of the final verses in [How the Grinch Stole Christmas](#) by Dr. Suess