



St. Luke the Evangelist: The Way of Generosity

Luke 19:1-10

Rev. Thomas G. James

Washington Street UMC

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This month we're talking about how we, as those who proclaim Christ as Lord, are called to respond in faithfulness to use the gifts God has given us for the purpose of advancing God's will on earth. We call this work, that is, the work of using the gifts we have for God's glory, *stewardship*. In many churches, stewardship is just a code word for saying, "we want your money." But stewardship is not just about money. Stewardship is about using all the gifts you have been given to respond to God in ways that make God's love known. It could be your time, your knowledge, your passion, your money, your physical assets, your expertise, or your friendliness in ways that share the love of God with others so that all might know God as Lord.

In our focus on stewardship, we are considering what we can learn about being faithful stewards from the saints who have come before us. The Biblical witness, and our historical accounts, offer us nothing, if they don't offer us a glimpse of faithfulness in generations past. Sometimes we read about people who weren't faithful, and we learn from their mistakes. Other times, we learn from the faithful – those we call saints – and we glean from their faithfulness how we too can be faithful in our age.

Last week we learned from Sarah Crosby, one of the first female Methodist preachers in the mid-18th Century, how stewardship is at times about *The Way of Necessity*. There are times when God isn't seeking a well thought out and discerned response; there are times when we are asked to engage with a present need in the moment and to trust that God will lead us as we respond.

Today, we are learning from St. Luke the Evangelist about stewardship as *The Way of Generosity*.

St. Luke the Evangelist is the author of the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. It is believed Luke was a doctor, which is built upon the assumption that this Luke is this Luke who is referenced in Colossians 4:14. In this text, Paul writes to the early church in Colossae, "Luke, the beloved physician, greets you." While there is some consensus among scholars this is the Luke who wrote the books, many suggest Luke was not as wealthy as many would assume a doctor to be. Some claim he was born a slave and educated as a physician so he could care for the family who owned him.

As a slave and family physician, it seems odd that Luke would become one of the more prominent evangelists, writing two of the New Testament texts. We learn more about Luke's story and his rationale for writing from his own pen, found in the first few verses of Luke, chapter 1. Luke tells us in his forward that he is well aware of the accounts of Jesus that have

been told. He knows of the oral tradition that has shared these stories. It is *because of* these stories that he too decided to investigate Jesus that he too may offer an “orderly account” of the events relating to Jesus. He says in verse 4, he wants to ensure that what has been said is truthful. He will write in his account only events he finds to be accurate.

Again, it’s hard to say with great certainty who Luke is, or the details of his background. But from what history we do have of his life, and in harmony with his own writing, it seems that Luke is educated enough to read and write, and confident enough in himself to be able to discern what stories are truthful, and which are not. It also seems he has the free time to investigate the stories of Christ, and perhaps the means to travel throughout the region to research the stories. With an education, being literate, and having the means and time to travel, Luke would be considered privileged in the First Century. By privileged, I mean, Luke had the opportunity to do things that many, if not most, could not. He had advantages in his life that most people of the time did not have.

If what Luke writes in the first four verses of the Gospel are true, then we should expect that the rest of the Gospel is his account of the stories of Jesus he has found to be truthful. Reading through the Gospel of Luke, you find that Luke shares many stories with Matthew and Mark. It is believed the three authors either pulled from each other, or perhaps even gleaned from a fourth source that has been lost over time. But for all that they share, Luke also includes eighteen parables and six miracle stories that are not found in the other gospel accounts.ⁱ In these additional stories, and even in some of the stories that overlap, it’s very clear that Luke believed that Jesus’ focus was on the poor, and issues of social justice.

Consider the Beatitudes, found in Luke 6 and Matthew 5. In Matthew’s Gospel, we read that Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor *in spirit*,” and “blessed are those who hunger and thirst *for righteousness*.” Yet, in Luke’s Gospel, we read, “Blessed are the *poor*,” and “blessed are those who *hunger now*.” Matthew’s account seems to be a statement about faith – Luke’s account seems to make a statement about personal wealth.

Luke may be writing from a place of personal privilege, but in doing so, “[he] skewers the very idea of privilege, making it clear that Jesus did not value people of privilege any more highly [than those with little or no privilege].”ⁱⁱ In truth, Luke’s focus throughout the gospel is *generosity*. “Generosity is giving freely without anxiety or thought for your own or another’s deserving; sharing what the world would call *yours* because you cannot conceive of behaving another way.”ⁱⁱⁱ

For Luke, faithfulness to Christ meant being a steward of one’s resources in the *the way of generosity*. We find that many of Luke’s stories point to generosity as Christ’s preferred response. Perhaps this is in no way better articulated than in our scripture reading from Luke 19.

Luke 19:1-10 is one of the better known Biblical stories because of the accompanying children’s song – a song I have known since I was about the age of my children. I thought it would be the

most appropriate song for us to sing to rededicate the organ today. So, if you know it, sing with me: *Zacchaeus was a wee little man, a wee little man was he. He climbed up in the sycamore tree for the Lord he wanted to see. And as the Savior passed that way, he looked up in the tree, and he said – Zacchaeus, you come down, for I'm going to your house today. For I'm going to your house today.*

Truthfully, they don't teach you when you're five what it means that Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector, or that we may have interpreted scripture incorrectly. I mean, consider verse 3, which says, "Zacchaeus was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature." ... When you read this carefully, you find that we have an unclear pronoun antecedent. Any English majors in the room? It says, "he was short in stature." ... Who is the *he*? Jesus, or Zacchaeus? Do we assume it is referring to Zacchaeus because he is made out to be the villain of the story, and the good guy is always a tall, long brown-haired, Casanova? I mean, well-groomed, studly white Jesus is our Savior, right? So he *must* be the tall one, yes?

I'm not really sure it matters which of the two is shorter – one of the two is short enough that Zacchaeus has to climb up in a tree to see Jesus as he comes walking by. What is clear is that Zacchaeus is made out to be the villain. Luke refers to Zacchaeus as the *chief* tax collector.

They are in the city of Jericho, which was home to one of Herod's palaces. It was a major center for taxation, and Zacchaeus is the chief tax collector. For as many tax collectors as we read about in the Biblical text, Zacchaeus is the only person in the New Testament referred to as a *chief* tax collector. He's not just corrupt, he's at the head of the corruption. As a tax collector, Zacchaeus has a quota of taxes he is required by the Roman government to collect. His personal salary, how much money he makes for doing his job, is based on how much *additional* money he requires people to pay him above and beyond what the Roman government requires. To be classified as the chief tax collector, we have to assume he was either one of the best at his job, meaning he had figured out how to take more money from people than the rest of the tax collectors – or perhaps he started a triangle scheme where he had tax collectors collecting for him, and he received a bonus cut of all the taxes they collected, which were filtered back through him before they were paid to the Roman government. In this chief tax collector role, he would not have been a friend of the locals, who surely all thought he was scamming or taking advantage of them. Zacchaeus is thought to be the villain, for, as the great past scholar and theologian, Fred Craddock, so well claims, "No one can be privately righteous while participating in and profiting from a program that robs and crushes other persons."^{iv}

Given his role in the community, it would have been unexpected that Jesus would have stopped and invited himself to Zacchaeus' home for dinner. No one, certainly not Zacchaeus, would have thought Jesus would have darkened the door of such an un-respected man's home. And yet, that's exactly what Jesus does ... though he doesn't exactly invite himself. At least, it doesn't seem like Zacchaeus is given an option. Jesus says, "I must stay at your house." The response of the community to Jesus inviting himself to the home of such a villain is (perhaps) expected. They grumbled and said, "Jesus has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner."

In our minds we often assume that Jesus and Zacchaeus go on to the house. It seems that is the next expected narrative step. But that isn't what the story says. Verse 8, which immediately follows the grumbling of the crowd, says, "Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord ..." They haven't gone anywhere. It seems Zacchaeus has heard the grumbling of the crowd, or perhaps he's just as amazed that the Lord has insisted on coming to his house, and so he's ready to respond in that moment. He says to the Lord, "I *give* half of my possessions, Lord, to the poor. And anyone I wrong, I pay back four times as much."

Now, I know our New Revised Standard Bible interprets Zacchaeus' response as, "I will give ..." or "I will pay back ...", almost as if he's repenting of wrong doing and promising to do better in the future. But the Greek verb here is *didomi*, which is the present active indicative form of the verb *to give*. In this form, Zacchaeus isn't saying he *will give*, he is saying, "I *am giving* half of my wealth to the poor." The same is true for the second half of his claim. He says, "I pay back four times as much to anyone I have wronged." The verb he uses here *apodidomi*, which again is the present active indicative form of the verb *to give back*. According to Luke's Greek writing, Zacchaeus is saying, "I *am giving back* four fold to anyone I have wronged."

In response to his claim – which again, is made not in the privacy of his home at the table with Jesus alone, it's made in the presence of the community, amidst all those who were just grumbling about Jesus going to his house for the night – Jesus responds saying, "Today, salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

For many, this story is about Zacchaeus' repentance of wrong doing, and his naming that going forward he will give back. Read in this way, Jesus' response is one that praises Zacchaeus for his repentance, and claims he has received salvation because the actions of his future life will be aligned with God's desire. But what if that reading is based on a faulty interpretation of the Greek text? What if Zacchaeus isn't repenting, but is instead *correcting* the false narrative others have of him? What if Zacchaeus is saying, in front of Christ and the whole of the community, "I am already giving half of my wealth to the poor, and anyone I have wronged, I am already paying back four-fold"?

What if the salvation Jesus speaks about is not based on our often limited understanding of salvation as being a deal between us and God, but is instead built upon the Jewish understanding of salvation as *shalom* – as wholeness – as being reconciled to the community and to one another? What if this story isn't important because it tells us of the power of Christ's presence to turn around a single person's life, but is about the power of Christ's presence to change a community at large?

What if Luke is using this story, not to talk about the power of repentance, but is using this story to highlight the importance of generosity. Read this way, we find this story "is a scene of revelation, not redemption."^v Jesus' presence draws out the truth of Zacchaeus' generosity, and

because the truth is one of faithful witness, Zacchaeus is reconciled to those who just moments ago grumbled at the Lord's favor for this disliked man.

For Luke, Jesus is an example of one who flips the script. He humbles the privileged, and gives privilege to the humble. For Luke, faithful stewardship is about the way of generosity – using what one has to care for the community. Luke is steeped in the Jewish faith, which “understands that God made creation with enough for everyone to flourish.”^{vi} From Jesus' call to the rich young ruler in Luke 18, who was called to give 100% of what he had, to Zacchaeus, who is praised for giving 50% of what he has, Luke never instructs a 10% tithing rule that sees generosity as a lawful mandate, he sees generosity as a faithful response to following the way of Christ.

St. Luke the Evangelist teaches us about stewardship as *the way of generosity*, as he makes clear that faithful living is about responding in faith to Christ by sharing of the gifts one has been endowed, that all may be cared for in the community, and that salvation – shalom – wholeness – justice – may be shared among the community. May we respond in like witness of our faith, in the way of generosity, that as stewards, we may care for the community into which we have been called. Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ *St. Luke*. www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=76. Retrieved October 18, 2018.

ⁱⁱ Sarah McGiverin. *St. Luke the Evangelist*. www.umcdiscipleship.org. Retrieved October 17, 2018.

ⁱⁱⁱ McGiverin.

^{iv} Fred B. Craddock. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Luke*. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2009.

^v Richard W. Swanson. *Provoking the Gospel of Luke: A Storyteller's Commentary*. The Pilgrim Press: Cleveland, 2006.

^{vi} Swanson.