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*For Good Measure*

Psalm 24:1-6, Luke 6:37-38, Luke 19:1-10

November 19, 2017

We have three wonderful scripture readings today. First, our Psalm, which Bob read, reminding us that the earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it, the whole entire world and everyone and everything that lives in it. It does not belong to China, or Russia, or the United States. It does not belong to Congress, or Apple, or Amazon, or the Koch brothers. The home Rod and I live in, and the land that surrounds it is not ours. My paycheck, my car, my favorite pair of earrings, even my children—not mine. The earth is the Lord's, and ALL that is in it, which is both very humbling and somehow reassuring.

Next we had a reading from the Gospel of Luke, famous words of Jesus, "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap." When I measured the coffee for my coffee pot this morning, I measure one tablespoon for every cup of coffee I want to make, and then I throw in an extra tablespoon for good measure. We use the phrase "for good measure" to mean something extra, something additional to what is required.

When Jesus shows up, there's always abundance. One boy's lunch of five loaves and two fish becomes enough for 5,000 men with 12 baskets leftover, and 180 gallons of water in stone jars become the best wine you've ever had in your life, two disciples catch so many fish that their nets begin to break, and so much healing power emanates from Jesus that even the touch of the hem of his robe is enough to heal a woman who has been bleeding for 12 years.

Jesus is like the Almost Home Café in Grantville on the north side of Highway 24. The omelets overflow the plates, and the biscuits are the size of your head, and even if you thought

you could eat a buffalo when you came in, you will not leave hungry, and you will more than likely leave with enough for an entire second meal.

And then we have the story of Zaccheus. And the first thing we learn about Zaccheus is that he was a chief tax collector and was rich. Let's quickly review how tax collection worked in those days. Roman governors would put the job of collecting money out for bids. The person who promised to collect the most, and who also knew the right people and made the right bribes, would win the job. Then, that person would go out and hire others to collect MORE than he himself had promised to submit. Those lower level collectors had to meet certain quotas, and anything they collected on top of that would be their profit. They were hired not only to collect taxes on land, crops, and people, but fees and tolls for goods and services, which caused a lot of friction with the tradespeople. As a chief tax collector, Zaccheus was closer to the top of this pyramid scheme, with lower level tax collectors reporting to him. People would have viewed him with resentment and suspicion.

The second thing we learn about Zaccheus is . . . he's short. I think maybe that's one thing that makes this story so endearing, because even those of us who grew up to be taller than average adults can remember back to being a kid, and being shorter than the grown-ups around us, and how we had to climb up on a chair to reach the cookie jar or have someone lift us up to see the parade, or how frustrating it was when some tall person sat in front of us at the movies. And maybe we also identify with him a little bit because nobody likes this short, rich tax collector—if they did, they'd make sure he had a front row seat at the parade when Jesus comes to town. Surely we've all had those moments—some of us have had years and even lifetimes—when we felt left out and unwanted.

Nevertheless, Zaccheus persisted, and he ran on ahead and found a sycamore tree, which is perfect because they're big trees with lots of low, leafy branches and got himself a seat.

As we look at the rest of the story, there are a couple of ways to see this. One way is to read it as Zaccheus encountering Jesus, and he's so transformed, that he immediately offers to share half his possessions with the poor and to repay anyone he has defrauded, four times the amount, which exceeds the standards of restitution in those times. This goes way beyond justice—this is extravagant generosity! You can just imagine if you were his wife overhearing this discussion, thinking, “Zaccheus, no, no, no, no! Not half! Are you out of your mind?”

But the verbs in this passage are present tense. So a number of scholars insist Zaccheus is saying to Jesus, “I already give half of my possessions to the poor, and I already make sure that if anyone is treated unfairly that I make good on it by four times the amount.” So then the focus becomes not Zaccheus, but the grumbling of the people, who assume that tax collectors, by nature of their position, are always morally bankrupt. When Jesus announces that salvation has come to this house, he is saying it for the benefit of the grumblers as much as for Zaccheus, as he reminds the people that Zaccheus is not an outsider, not a scoundrel—he's one of them, and he is just as beloved by God as they are. Do not judge . . .

However we read it, salvation and money are connected. It's not that Zaccheus gives away his money and thereby gains his salvation—as any good Presbyterian knows, salvation is always a gift of God and nothing we can ever earn or deserve. But strange things happen when we let God come home with us—we can't let God in without letting God all the way in, to every part of our lives: money, relationships, attitudes, work, the way we treat the earth and all its creatures, every part of who we are. It's like putting a drop of red food coloring in a glass of water—it doesn't stay there where you put it—it moves around and saturates the whole glass.

Something like this has happened to Zaccheus. For him to cling to his money, to hoard it and not share it, to take advantage of people financially--he just can't do it anymore, even if it makes him as poor as everybody else. And he doesn't seem too worried about it, either. In fact, he's happy (this is one of the rare stories about a rich person that has a happy ending in Luke's Gospel).

Think of Ebenezer Scrooge when he wakes up after the visit from the third Spirit, realizes he's got a second chance at life, and what does he do? Sings. Dances. Stands on his head. Buys a giant turkey for the Cratchits, and starts sharing his wealth all over the place. [ Jesus brings healing, and healing isn't just for our physical bodies—it's for money issues, too. If we want it.]

So. This is Commitment Sunday, when we make our financial pledges to the mission and ministry of this particular church for the coming year. Why do that? What's the best reason to give our hard-earned money in this way?

One good reason to give might be the desire to invest in the future of the church. Maybe we grew up in a church where people nurtured us when we were a demanding toddler, taught us Bible stories and songs, took us on mission trips when we were awkward teenagers, and through all its various ministries, helped us learn to know and love God, and we treasure those experiences. As part of this church, perhaps we see the way our worship touches hearts and minds, we see people working together to help turn the church around, to reach out to our neighbors and show them we're here and we care. Yesterday, I saw some families bringing their children to help with the Harvest Offering, and I thought to myself, wow—this is my 4<sup>th</sup> Harvest Offering, and I've seen some of these children at every single one of them. They are growing up and learning that part of being a faithful church together means helping to feed our neighbors. We might be motivated to give because we want future generations to have the blessings of faith that we ourselves have had. That's a great reason to give. But not the best one.

Maybe we're motivated to give because the church also gives. We support missions of the Presbyterian Church, we give to Doorstep, Let's Help, Kansas Children's Service League, CASA, Meals on Wheels, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance—we have a Blessing Box on our property which is stocked at least five days each week—we provided 100 families in Topeka with the makings of a bountiful Thanksgiving dinner yesterday—we adopt families in need for Christmas—we are connecting with an area elementary school and constantly looking for more ways to love our neighbors and to share God's love from the heart of Topeka. Giving has a special impact when it comes from the church, because it testifies to our belief in Jesus Christ, who commanded us to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and visit the sick and those in prison. If that's why we give, that's a great reason—but not the best one.

Maybe you give because you love all the things that are distinctive about the Presbyterian Church. Maybe you really believe in our system of government by representation, and our grace-filled theology, and the fact that our polity allows for men and women, straight and gay people to serve as ordained elders and deacons and ministers of the word and sacrament. Maybe you appreciate the thoughtful structure of Presbyterian worship, the way everything centers around the word of God. Or the way communion is for everyone, not just Presbyterians. Maybe you believe the world today needs more, not fewer, Presbyterians, and you'd like to make sure our brand sticks around for a while. Again, a great reason to give. But not the best one.

Some of us give because it's just the right thing to do as Christians, plain and simple. The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it. It's all God's—we're just taking care of it. How can we not give back to God a portion of what God so richly gives to us? And some of us give because we believe we are blessed when we do—as I read a few weeks ago in Proverbs, “Honor the Lord with your substance, with the first fruits of your harvest—then your barns will always

be full and your vats will be bursting with wine.” There’s something about giving, especially when we reach a full tithe, that seems to bless people far more than it costs them. Some of you already know what that feels like, and now that you know, you’re never going back. The desire to do what is right is a great reason to give, and the desire to be blessed is another great reason to give. All of the reasons I’ve listed so far are great, and if these are your reasons, then thanks be to God. But there’s another reason that might be even better.

One day, Jesus was passing through Jericho. There was a rich tax collector, the chief tax collector, and he wanted to see Jesus. But he was short, and couldn’t see over the crowds, and nobody cared enough to make room for him in the front where a person of his height COULD see, so he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus as he passed. It was kind of a humbling thing to do, a man in his position, running, which men of the ancient middle East did not do, and then climbing a tree, of all things, but he did it. And then the thing he least expected happened—Jesus saw him, and stopped under his tree, and said, “Zaccheus. Come down. You don’t have to climb a tree to see me, because you and I are going to talk face to face. I want to come to your house today.”

Whoever you are, wherever you are, whatever you’ve done or not done, whatever is going on in your life right now, whatever anybody else thinks, Jesus seeks YOU. Jesus stops for YOU. Jesus calls you by YOUR name. Jesus says, come on down, I’m right here. And I choose you. I want to come into your life today. You, too, are a child of God. I’m here for YOU.

That’s the best reason.