

Wesley United Methodist Church

October 30, 2016

“Gratitude.”

Luke 19:1-10

I want to begin this morning by telling you about some of my most prized possessions.

The first is a simple ordinary rock. It’s a rock with a painted face on it. It just sits on my stairs at my mountain home, I have had it for over 30 years. It’s not worth a lot, but I cherish it. If I tried to sell it, I couldn’t get much money for it, but you see, I would never even consider selling it, because I treasure it so much. Why is it so special to me? Not because of what it is. Not because of how it looks. Not even because of what it does...but because of the one who gave it to me. Our daughter, Erika, gave that painted face rock to me when she was about six years old. She made it for me in Sunday School and it’s the symbol of her love. The giver, not the gift, makes it special...

The second prized possession of mine is just a piece of wood that says “I love you.” This little piece of kindling was created by our daughter, Christel, when Walt was building a dog house with the girls. I love that little piece of sliver. It has been on my night stand and collects dust. Again, it’s not the gift, but the giver that makes it special.

One more prized possession is a homemade cat that was created by our oldest daughter, Heidi, when she was in Kindergarten, she always showered us with special little gifts to show her gratitude. “To the bestest Mom in the world,” said the card that came with it. It sure made me feel good. I believe that she didn’t know any other mom at the time, so I was the bestest. (It’s a word that we made up many years ago). When they’re in their teens, there is a time-period in their lives; they often change their mind about our parental skills.

These gifts are special to me because of the special persons who gave them to me. That’s the real key to life, the real key to joy, the real key to genuine gratitude, to stress the giver rather than the gifts. For you see, we can gain the whole world and all the gifts and miss the giver and lose our own souls.

Celebrating the giver rather than the gift—that’s the key and when you make that breakthrough, you can never be the same. That kind of gratitude will change your life! There is a beautiful example of this in the Bible—the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-10. Remember the story with me...

Jesus and his disciples are heading toward the showdown in Jerusalem. As they pass through Jericho, a great crowd gathered to see Jesus. Zacchaeus was in the crowd. The scriptures tell us that Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector and rich...and that he was disliked and despised by his fellow town’s people. They resented paying taxes to Rome and they felt that Zacchaeus, a fellow Jew, had betrayed them, had sold out to Rome, and had gotten rich at their expense. So, they rejected him, shunned him, and detested him. If you had conducted a popularity contest in Jericho that day, Zacchaeus may well have come in dead last.

This was the setting when Jesus came to Jericho that day. People heard about Jesus and they gathered along the streets to see him. Zacchaeus was also eager to see the Nazarene, but Zacchaeus was a little man and he couldn’t see over the crowd. So, he ran ahead and climbed into a sycamore tree in hopes of getting a glimpse of this great leader everyone was talking about.

When Jesus saw him, he sensed that Zacchaeus was the loneliest man in town and his heart went out to him. Jesus looked up and said, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” Zacchaeus was visibly touched, overwhelmed by this acceptance and this special honor. It had been a long time since anyone had been nice to him. Zacchaeus was so grateful, so filled with gratitude, that it changed his life. Notice that Jesus gave him no material gifts. He gave him something better: love, respect, acceptance...forgiveness. Zacchaeus became so grateful that his whole lifestyle changed. Why, it even touched his wallet. Before he had been a “taker,” and now he became a “giver.”

That’s the way it works. When we become truly grateful to God for the gift of his love...we can’t be the same anymore! We are changed! We are turned around. We are converted, transformed. Zacchaeus was so grateful for Christ’s acceptance of him and love for him that his life, his relationships and his reason for living were dramatically changed. That’s what real gratitude does! It changes our lives!

When you realize that God is loving, accepting, forgiving...it changes your life. You don’t have to be afraid or anxiety-ridden anymore...Gratitude becomes the life blood of your life style. Zacchaeus learned it that day in Jericho...and it gave him a new relationship with God...not a relationship built on fear and appeasement, but now a relationship built on love and grace.

Something happened to Zacchaeus that day. As Jesus came to him and accepted him, that acceptance touched something deep within Zacchaeus and brought him back to his senses and back to God, and caused him to see things differently.

Likewise, when we love God and accept his love for us, then we can suddenly see things differently. We see all the beautiful things he has graciously given us. Everywhere we look, everything we see reminds us of God...and all that he has lovingly prepared for us. Real gratitude gives us a new relationship with God—and causes us to see miracles everywhere.

Albert Einstein once put it like this: “There are only two ways to live your life: one is to see nothing as a miracle—the other is to see everything as a miracle.” That’s the number one thing we learn from the Zacchaeus story. Real gratitude gives us a new relationship with God.

In the “Wizard of Id” comic strip, the priest asks, “Of all the major sins, which one do you consider to be number one?” “Well,” came the reply, “They’re all bad, but I think I like greed the best.”

Zacchaeus could have identified with that. He had been greedy. He had cheated. He had taken advantage of others...but then Jesus came to him and reached out to him and included him and ate with him, which in New Testament times was a dramatic symbol of forgiveness...and Zacchaeus was changed, redeemed, converted.

He was so grateful that Jesus had accepted him that he came down out of that Sycamore tree with love in his heart. He had a new regard for others and said, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.” Did he do it? Only Jesus knows.

Every now and then I try to think of a new idea about what it means to be grateful. Here is my thought for this year: If gratitude is the celebration of God’s generosity, then the Christian lifestyle is the imitation of God’s generosity. That is, the best way to express our gratitude to God is to imitate, to model, to emulate his generosity in our daily living, to take on his gracious and generous approach and to live daily in that spirit.

Zacchaeus got it! He saw it and did it! The question is, do we? Are we God-like in our living?