

**OPENING:**

An Episcopalian was shipwrecked on a deserted island with one other companion.

The companion immediately made a signal fire.

The Episcopalian immediately made a comfortable lounge in the sand out of leaves.

The companion spelled out “H... E... L... P” in rocks and shells on the beach.

The Episcopalian cracked open a coconut for a refreshing beverage.

The companion began to consider their options for shelter.

The Episcopalian was weaving a hat to keep the sun off.

The companion became annoyed at the Episcopalian's lack of concern for their situation. Finally, he could hold it in no longer:

"Why are you not helping?!? We could be stuck on this island for years!"

The Episcopalian replied "Don't worry. I'm an Episcopalian and I tithed.

The stewardship chair WILL find me."

**TITHING:**

The biblical standard for giving is indeed to tithe, that's 1/10 of one's income.

And most of us struggle to get there, including me.

For what it's worth, Luke over the last few weeks has actually given us a lot of different standards, an array of giving percentages of how much God requires from us.

For example, in our lesson today, Zacchaeus gives 1/2.

The Pharisee last week gave 1/10 (he TITHED!) but was chastised for bragging about it.

The widow, later in Luke, will be applauded for dropping just the one mite, the one coin, the one shekel into the giving plate.

Meanwhile, the rich young ruler was asked to give EVERYTHING, 100%, and he declines.<sup>1</sup>

(You wonder if he would have the Zacchaeus' deal of 1/2.)

You wonder if this is all Jesus' version of a “progressive tax”—where Jesus calibrates his “ask” based on some set of calculations.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 18.12-14, Luke 21.1-4, Luke 18.18-30.

Maybe the great fear is that that there is no mechanical number (like 10%), that we should give.<sup>2</sup>

That God somehow requires more than that, or maybe less.

Regardless, if everyone gave 1/10<sup>th</sup>, we would not be talking about Stewardship so much.

## **JOY**

My least favorite stewardship gimmick (and this goes for churches, but also any non-profit) is that when they say something like “if you just gave a little bit more, just the price of ‘(blank)’ then our organization would be in good footing.”

And always what’s in that “blank” is the thing you enjoy the most in your life.

They say: “just give up that nice cup of coffee from Starbucks, just that dinner out with the family at the restaurant, just that (whatever).” That will make the difference.

Those things tend to be the those that truly give joy in this broken and painful world and then people say: “Give up those and then give instead JOYFULLY to the church.”

I think that sort of appeal sells ourselves short when we operate there in the margins.

By the way, Betsy and I are playing good cop/ bad cop today on this our Celebration Sunday, the Last Sunday of our 2023 Stewardship Campaign.

I will concentrate on the CELEBRATION part, she will concentrate on the LAST SUNDAY part!

## **ZACCHAEUS**

The power of the Zacchaeus story is in the JOY with which Zacchaeus gives. It’s the Celebration of what he does. That’s what has captivated the ages about this story..

He, Zacchaeus, was a ‘WEE LITTLE MAN’

He was a traitor, a quisling, the equivalent of a European Jew in the 1930s collaborating with Hitler.

And then he met Jesus, and something about that encounter changed everything. And he stood up tall, and he stood his ground, and he raised his voice.

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<sup>2</sup> Hays, Richard B. 1996. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: a contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 125.

Zacchaeus gave ½ of his income, and 1/1 of his soul, in that stewardship campaign.<sup>3</sup>

Notice how there is no lecture from Jesus, no shame directed at his audience, and there is no gimmick in his appeal. Jesus loves Zacchaeus, and that LOVE, God's grace unlocks the faith that will move mountains by any percentage.<sup>4</sup>

The common denominator in all of Jesus' appeals in the Gospel of Luke, with Zacchaeus, with the widow, with the Pharisee, is this idea of surrender, of joyful giving. There is no forced algorithmic standard. Instead, it's the uncoerced nature of the relationship, it's giving as a symbol and sign of faith, as a response to God's grace, that is important.

So, think of it this way: 'Church' should be your trip to Starbucks, your vacation, your night out. Of course, it should be more than that. It's the moment when you say I could not live without this. It's the joyful celebration of who we are as a community and a homecoming to the source of that life and love.

Making the church be that, might be harder than saying: 'give 10%.' I'll take either 😊 or both.

## **STEWARDSHIP**

In the Eastern Orthodox Church, the last Sunday before Lent is known as "Zacchaeus Sunday," and it features this story for the same reason that this is a really good story to have on the Last Sunday of Stewardship, it's a story that sums up all of human discipleship, and happens to be the last letter in the alphabet

We have gotten through all the stories of the Bible, all the characters A-Z. We started with Aaron, Moses' brother who made idols out of bronze, in the same way that we make idols out of whatever in our lives that we spend money on, whatever false gods that we worship.

Then, all throughout the alphabet, we go all through these different responses to faith, different ways of being stewards,

Finally we end with this short little man despised by his own people...

maybe that's God's way of saying that God has as many standards for giving as there are names in the Bible, and that none of this is really ours ...

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<sup>3</sup> Christopher, J. Clif. 2015. *Not Your Parents' Offering Plate: A New Vision for Financial Stewardship*. (2nd Ed.) Nashville: Abingdon, 32.

<sup>4</sup> "Pentecost 21 (C)- 'Wee Little Bernie Madoff.'" *Mockingbird Same Old Song* Podcast (October 24, 2022). [Pentecost 21 \(C\): Wee Little Bernie Madoff - Mockingbird \(mbird.com\)](#)

and we are all are just in the crowd, incapable of seeing what's in front of us, until we have that moment where God calls out to us.<sup>5</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Church is one of the rare areas of life where people get asked for money face-to-face.

Other organizations (like the United Way or the symphony) will ask for money and have fancy brochures, but the church does it person.

It will look you in the eye and ask face-to-face.

That can be awkward, it's much easier to round up at the supermarket kiosk to give to whatever charity, or to give anonymously to a cause online.

And there's nothing wrong with those.

But here, it's visceral and face-to-face, hopefully the Church does it like God does it in our story

Jesus *calling* us, Jesus calling *to* us, Jesus calling us *out*, saying:

“Zacchaeus, come down from that tree.”

saying “St Timothy's, I am not down with you yet, you're BACK. It's time to celebrate and it's time to get to work.”

God calls all of us, regardless of who we are,

God calls the widow and her mite,

the one lost sheep from the 99, for the one lost coin in the floorboard,

and the Episcopalian deserted on an island,

and for me.

and says “I am coming to your house! And I might ask you for money!”

God says I don't care how short you are,

what has happened in the past,

or what people are saying and grumbling about you. You are mine and I want all of you. 100 percent.

## AMEN

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<sup>5</sup> Buechner, Frederick. . 203-205