

“How Do We Measure Generosity?”  
Luke 19:1-10  
14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

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Westminster, Greenville  
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In Ron Howard’s splendid new film, *Thirteen Lives*, Howard tells the story of the famous rescue of 12 boys from a cave in Thailand, back in the summer of 2018.

The boys were all part of a football—ie, a soccer team—and after practice one day, the boys go exploring in a cave with their coach, but the monsoon rains come suddenly, surprising the team, trapping the boys and their coach in the cave.

The rescue becomes an international effort.  
Many scenes of heroism emerge throughout the film.

One of the most moving scenes involved the local farmers whose fields of rice paddies surrounded the cave. I didn’t remember hearing about this at the time. One of the steps required in extracting the boys from the cave was to figure out how to stop the water from rising and rising so quickly.

An engineer says that it’s not enough to pump the water out. They’ll never keep up! The water must be diverted before it seeps inside.

And the only way to do that is to build a system of gutters on the top and sides of the mountain, which will send the rain water into the rice paddies below. But that means those farmers will lose their crops.

There’s a scene in the film in which this proposal is presented to those farmers. Are they willing to give up their crops, the very food that will feed their own families in the coming year?

And without missing a beat, the farmers agree.  
Anything to save the boys.

It's a gripping scene in the movie, but I got to wondering, after watching the film...did that part really happen? Did those farmers really sacrifice their crops?

I looked it up—and it did.

When those farmers made that decision, they did not know, could not know whether the boys would live. They may ruin their crops and the rescue operation could still end up failing.

But they decided to do it.

By any measure, the decision those farmers made—it was extraordinarily generous thing to do.

How do we measure generosity?

I ask because generosity is one of the pillars of our church.

It is a part of Westminster's DNA.

It's something that drew me to come to this church four years ago.

It's a core value of this congregation, a Christian discipline, something that I have seen Westminster practice over and over again.

**So how do we measure generosity?**

**In your life, in my life, in the life of this church?**

One of the ways that we've measured generosity around here has been through the money that we budget, year in and year out, to give away.

And I learned this past spring just how remarkable our giving is.

Looking at larger churches in our denomination...if you rank churches by the percentage of money that they give away, and if you look at that amount as a percentage of a church's income, and as a percentage of expenditures, we are one of the leaders in our denomination.

In other words, Westminster is right at the top.  
But it's not RANKINGS that matter to me the most.  
It's the relationships.  
The relationships that generosity creates.

This past spring, I was working at Soteria's new house for formerly incarcerated women. It was Hands on Greenville day, I was there with about 30 others of you, and it was a marvelous morning to connect with other church members, to help make this new home ready for its residents. And I kept thinking about how it would never have been possible without the large donation this church made in the midst of the pandemic to help purchase that home.

In other words, I was there with one of my sons because of the generosity that came from each of you. Because of the relationships that Westminster is committed to nurturing with our neighbors.

Over and over and over again, Westminster does this kind of thing.  
Generosity is part of the culture around here.  
There is no way to argue the point.

In fact, I got to wondering, is there really a sermon that needs to be preached beyond what I've just said?

Generosity is a pillar of this church.  
Can I get an "Amen" to that?  
I got to thinking maybe I should end the sermon with that Amen.  
I could sit down.  
We could get on with the rest of our worship...

How many think I should do that?  
Don't answer that...I'm not putting that question to a vote this morning.

You see, the history of generosity at Westminster is not the only way to think about this topic.

Here's another way:  
What will generosity look like in our future?

If you've been following the first few weeks of this sermon series, then you know that one of the goals for the upcoming year is growth.

Not just growth in membership.  
But growth in the ways that we connect with one another and with our neighbors.

In other words, growth in engagement—both inside these walls and outside these walls. Which at this time in our church's life is going to mean...growing our church staff.

You will hear me repeat this refrain throughout the fall.  
We have a very specific need right now when it comes to staffing.  
Not our pastoral staffing.  
But our administrative staff, our managerial staff.

Compared to other large churches our size, we spend a very small amount on the administrative and program staff of our church.

So let me put it like this.  
How many of you like seeing the new member classes when all sorts of visitors decide to join our church?

And how many of you like seeing all the baptisms that occur around here?

And how many of you are committed to doing whatever is necessary to help our new members get plugged into the life of this church, so that they feel embraced by this church and fed by our church and could never imagine going anywhere else other than Westminster Presbyterian Church?

Good.

What that's going to take is a few strategic additions to our staff in the coming years. The Session has been in conversation about this since the spring. We cannot sustain our church's growth without adding more staff to help support that growth.

**How do we measure generosity?**

**Let me suggest a new challenge for our church.**

I believe that we can remain a generous church when it comes to Witness & Service giving, AND I believe that we can grow our administrative and program staff, which will in turn support the growth that's currently going on...

If we can do that—grow our staff and remain robust in our Witness & Service giving... THAT will be another wonderful example of Westminster answering the question:

Who is God calling us to be?

A generous people....

That's not just a financial question.

It's a THEOLOGICAL question.

Generosity goes so much farther than our wallets.

Generosity gets to the heart of being the person whom God created us to be.

Let me now give you a theological pop quiz.  
Just what you were looking forward to, I know...but the first question is an easy question.

In whose image are you created?  
God's.

And how generous has God been with you?  
That's a harder question to answer.  
Because which one of us could ever measure the generosity of God in our lives?

But I do know that the same generous spirit that is part of the Almighty...is, by definition, also a part of me, and a part of you.

So when it comes to generosity, it's about more than our wallets.  
It's about the generous Spirit of the living Lord that lives in each of us.

A Spirit that goes back generation upon generation...do you remember the story of Joseph that we heard in our first scripture reading today?

Joseph was thrown in a pit by his brothers.  
He was sold as a slave to Midianites by his brothers.  
And then, all those years later in Egypt...Joseph's brothers come to him in need of food, in need of help!

How would you have responded to those brothers who sold you into slavery?

Joseph did not exact revenge on them.

He did not politely ignore them.  
 He reunites with them.  
 He was generous with them.

And do you remember how he described it?

“God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God...”

Joseph saw the generosity of God at work, and he responded in kind...

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What if you and I woke up each morning, and our first question was not, “What do I need to do today?”

What if our first question was this:  
 How can I be generous today?

Generous with my words?  
 Generous with my judgments?  
 Generous with how I see and treat other people in my life?

Perhaps there’s a person in your life whom you’re tempted to ignore, to shut out, to give up on...and perhaps what God is asking of each of us at this moment is to be generous...generous in how we approach that person, how I respond to that person, how you and I love that person who is difficult to love.

You see, that’s what Zacchaeus was up against.  
 Zacchaeus was difficult to love.  
 Almost everyone wanted to ignore him, to shut him out.

After all, Zacchaeus wasn't just a tax collector, he was a chief tax collector. In cahoots with the Romans, he was despised among his own people.

And that day long ago, out of all the people that were trying to see Jesus, Jesus called out...to Zacchaeus. And Jesus told Zacchaeus that he—Jesus—needed to stay at his house that day.

It was an extraordinarily generous thing for Jesus to do.

And Zacchaeus responded in kind.  
Zacchaeus pledged half of his money to the poor.  
And he promised restitution **TIMES FOUR!**

Please note: the order of events in this story is very important.  
The generosity of Zacchaeus is **NOT** what wins Jesus over!  
It's not like Zacchaeus called out to Jesus, and said, "I'll give half my money to the poor if you stay at my place tonight!"

No, no...  
Zacchaeus' generosity is a response to Jesus.  
It's a response to the grace and acceptance and welcome that Jesus had just offered him.

Which is no different than any of us.  
When you and I engage in acts of generosity—  
with how we treat other people,  
with what we give to other people—  
it's not because we are such good  
givers.

It's because we are, first and foremost, **RECEIVERS.**

Recipients of God's goodness,  
recipients of God's grace,  
receivers of the abundant and boundless generosity of God...



You don't have to be a chief tax collector to know what that's like.

Can you think of a time when you have been a recipient of someone else's goodness and grace?

If it were not for that person's generosity, that person's grace,  
you would not be the person you are today?

And upon reflection, you knew it was not just that person,  
but the spirit of God working through that person,  
that made all the difference...

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The writer and Presbyterian minister Fred Buechner died last month. Buechner's writings influenced hundreds of thousands of people throughout his career, shaping their faith journeys in new ways, including plenty of pastors, including this pastor.

In one of his memoirs, Buechner writes that he wasn't very religious growing up. But in his mid-twenties, he started going to church. It wasn't out of any Christian commitment. He was just feeling lonely.

One day, however, the preacher George Buttrick said something that changed Buechner's life—it was a phrase,  
two words,  
that was all.

Buttrick was preaching about how Christ refused the crown Satan offered him in the wilderness, but is King nonetheless, because he gets crowned over and over again in the hearts of people who believe in him.

And that coronation takes place, Buttrick said—

and here comes the phrase—  
 “among confession, and tears, and great  
 laughter.”

Great laughter—it was that phrase, those two words, that did it for  
 Buechner, and he ended up in seminary the next fall. His life was utterly  
 changed—

forever—

because of the words “great laughter.”

Twenty-five years later, Buechner asked George Buttrick for a  
 transcript of the sermon that changed his life, and Buttrick still had a  
 copy. So he sent it to Buechner in the mail...and Fred Buechner opened  
 it up, read it through...and he was astonished to see that the words  
 “great laughter” weren’t even there!

All he could conclude was that Buttrick had “dreamed up [those  
 two words] at the last minute and ad-libbed it”. And Buechner goes on  
 to say that “on just such foolish...holy threads as that hang the destinies  
 of us all.”<sup>1</sup>

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Now...when I first read that, back in seminary, I was annoyed.

I thought to myself, “I don’t want my destiny hanging on some  
 thread!

What if Buttrick hadn’t said those words?

What if Buechner hadn’t heard them?

Where would he be then?”

And then it dawned on me: that’s the whole point.

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, *The Sacred Journey*, New York: HarperCollins, 1982.

Buttrick wasn't planning on saying that, and Buechner wasn't planning on hearing that, but Buttrick did say it, and Buechner did hear it, not because they were so great but because God was so good!

It wasn't a story about Buechner.  
It was a story about God!

It was a story about God's generosity and goodness and grace, at work in Fred Buechner's life in a way he could never see coming.

Does that sound familiar?  
What about your life?  
What about my life?

Has the generosity of God Almighty been at work in your life, in ways you never saw coming?

If your answer to that question is yes, I don't need you to raise your hand.

I don't even want you to shout AMEN right now.

Just do what Zacchaeus did.  
Take the gifts, the grace, the generosity that you have received from God...

And share it.  
Share it. Share it. Share it.

(Amen.)