

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

24th Sunday after Pentecost
Year B

Duane M. Harris

November 8, 2015

Text: Luke 19:1-10

Title: “Earn, Save, Give: Give All You Can”

Mrs. Baker was an elderly woman that lived across the street from our family when I was only 4 or 5 years old. She lived in a house that was surrounded by long-overgrown trees and shrubs so that you could hardly see her house. It was a bit creepy looking as I remember it. Unkempt, big front porch. Windows always closed and never washed. She seldom made an appearance outside and she seldom had company.

Our mother, however, took to heart the command to love your neighbor. I really don't know the details but she encouraged us when we were very small to make little gifts for Mrs. Baker near Christmas time. I think I've shared this story with you before, but we'd make Christmas Santas out of color paper to hang in the window or a card holder out of a Welch's Grape Juice can, cut the two ends out and wrapped it with green yarn, or stick a candle in a bottle and melt old crayons until it covered all the glass. Crafty stuff just for Mrs. Baker.

Then on the appointed day we all trekked over there: our mother, my brother and sister and me. Walked up the steps that creaked with each step, vines wrapped on the handrails. Creepy to little kids. One of us would knock, and the door would be flung open and Mrs. Baker greeted us with a toothless smile and enthusiastic “Welcomes” that outshone any Walmart greeter. She was just elated that we were there, and even as a little child I could experience her joy. She'd make cookies and have something to drink, and she would chat with my mother and us too. After a while the gifts would be exchanged and she would go on and on about how she loved that yarn covered grape juice can or that beautiful Christmas candle my brother had made. It was an experience of sheer joy sitting in her old musty house with a woman who exuded the kind of hospitality that cemented in my memory what it really means to give. Our mother and Mrs. Baker taught us that in those annual visits.

I always think about that experience when I think about giving as a follower of Jesus because my mother was motivated by her commitment to love our neighbor as Jesus instructed, and she taught her children what it looked like to do so with that very simple and yet profound annual visit to Mrs. Baker's. I thought about it again as I began to think about Wesley's last rule for money: Give all you can.

With the exception of last week when we celebrated All Saints Sunday, we have been considering John Wesley's simple rules about money: Earn all you can. Save all you can and finally, give all you can. You may remember some of Wesley's practical wisdom about the first

rule: earn all you can:

1. Gain/Earn all you can by honest industry, use all possible diligence in your calling.
2. Gain/Earn all you can by common sense.
3. Gain/Earn all you can without paying more for it than it is worth.
but not at the expense of your health.
not at the expense of your mind or your soul.
not at the expense of your neighbor.
in ways that honor God.

Wesley's closing remarks on this simple rule are: "These cautions and restrictions being observed, it is the bounden duty of all who are engaged in worldly business to observe that first and great rule of Christian wisdom with respect to money; Gain [Earn] all you can.

We then considered the second rule: Save all you can by being a prudent manager of God's gifts. You may remember the 10-10-80 practice: 10% to God, 10% for the future, 80% for everything else. Save all you can so that we can be empowered to abide by the third rule of money: Give all you can.

I remember years ago one cynic who said that most people have no problem with Wesley's first two rules—earn and save—but most forget the third—give all you can. Wesley pointed out the warnings of doing so when he preached:

Let not any man imagine that he has done anything, barely by going thus far, by "gaining and saving all he can," if he were to stop here. All this is nothing, if a man go not forward, if he does not point all this at a farther end. Nor, indeed, can a man properly be said to save anything, if he only lays it up. You may as well throw your money into the sea.... Not to use, is effectually to throw it away.... Add the Third rule to the two preceding. Having, First, gained all you can, and, Secondly saved all you can, Then "give all you can."

It is that rule which we consider this morning.

When it comes to giving all we can, what does this mean? What is the formula? How do we determine when we have done so? Why even consider giving all we can as a serious guideline when it comes to money? Do we really have to do this in order to be Christ-like or to receive salvation?

Let's turn to Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus in the Gospel According to Luke and consider some answers to these questions. Obviously many of you know the story because you knew the song. Here is a man who was hated. Not only was he a tax collector but he was a chief tax collector which means he took a cut of those under his employ. He had risen to CEO status, making millions on the backs of the poor and middle class, the business men and women, the fisherman and the carpenter. Zacchaeus may have been short in stature but he didn't let that stop

him from padding his own pockets, and he did it by stressing the lives of his own people. No group of people was so despised as tax collectors. Driven by their own greed, they could be harsh task masters in taking money from those who worked for a living. Think legalized loan shark who would send his muscle men after you if you didn't pay up. All perfectly legal and supported by the government. Therefore, people didn't feel very kindly toward tax collectors.

It may be how I feel about the anonymous swindlers who put together that bogus phone call many of us have received about the IRS suing us for back taxes owed, and—oh-- you need to call this phone number so we can convince you to send us private information that will enable us to relieve you of some of your savings, except of course such a tactic is not legal in this country. Still, someone is trying to take advantage of vulnerable people through threat and intimidation to steal money. We've received that phone message many times in our home, and it always gives me pleasure to push the delete button, but still I hate the tactic these people use in the name of greed, and if I could put a face with the originator of this tactic, I'd have a hard time not transferring my feelings about the tactic to the person. I expect I might see the face of Zacchaeus and feel about him the same way his community felt about him: disdainful anger.

So this despised man who is wealthy enough to hire lackeys to do much of the work, hears Jesus is coming to town, and apparently gets excited about seeing him. James Harnish, the author of the study being used in the Girlfriend's class and in Jaye Reisinger's short term study, likes to think that Zacchaeus may have already known Jesus. Earlier in Luke's Gospel, Jesus calls another tax collector named Levi to join him as one of his disciples. Levi threw a party after the invitation. On the invitation list was a "great crowd of tax collectors". Harnish imagines that Zacchaeus was one of them and so he may have already known Jesus, knew what he was about, which is why—perhaps—he was excited about seeing him come to his town, Jericho. He wanted more of Jesus.

As Jesus makes his way down the main street of Jericho, people are swarming. Zacchaeus tries to get a glimpse but the crowd won't allow it. I imagine a few elbows being thrown at this short tax collector. People know who he is, so an accidental elbow to the face may be just a little retribution, maybe a bit like the slight pleasure I feel by hitting the delete button on the answering machine, except an elbow might be more gratifying. They won't let him in, won't let him to the front of the crowd, as they might a child knowing he can't see.

But Zacchaeus is no fool. He knows the route through town and he knows where the sycamore tree is by which Jesus will be passing, and so he runs ahead of the crowd and in his fancy, expensive clothes and sandals, he climbs that tree. This is something a man would not do. Remember that childhood direction parents give daughters about not climbing trees in a dress? Well, robes were worn by men back in the day. To climb a tree in one would not only be awkward but it could expose a man. Not only that but who—even today—would climb a tree in an Armani suit? Zacchaeus was motivated by some deep need.

Maybe that deep need was to be loved and accepted because even though he had it all-- the great house, great investments, great wardrobe, no financial worries whatsoever—he paid a price. His own people—maybe even his own family—wouldn't let him in. All the things he had achieved as he rose in the ranks and made good money didn't bring the kind of satisfaction for which he had hoped. Still didn't make him feel like the big man whose life was rich and full of hope and joy. It may be that his life demonstrated what Jesus was getting at in Matthew's Gospel when he preached "Why would people gain the whole world but lose their lives? What will people give in exchange for their lives?" (Matthew 16:26). Zacchaeus wanted and needed

something more and so he was willing to risk ridicule, willing to give up his dignity, and climb that tree in the off chance that Jesus might somehow offer it to him. It's possible that he heard what others had heard: Jesus told stories of lost coins, lost sheep, and lost sons in order to describe God whose love was so great that God would seek people out, welcome them home and celebrate their return no matter how broken and unlovable they might appear to those around them. With that possibility before him he didn't give a rip about what other people thought of him. If Jesus gave him what he in his heart of hearts needed—all the acceptance, worth and love that he'd spent so much of his life energy seeking though not finding it—then this momentary indignity would be worth it.

As Jesus passes by, of course, he notices. A full grown man, however tall or short, does not climb trees. Something was up (pun intended) with this man. So Jesus does something extraordinary: he calls him by his name and invites himself over to his house. It's an act of intimacy, of friendship. When everyone else shunned him—and deservedly so—Jesus sees a deeper need in the man and embraces him as “a son of Abraham” as one who was “lost”. We call it “grace” as Christians: it's the unmerited, unearned gift of God's love and acceptance that is a full blown gift.

Once he experienced that gift, Zacchaeus responds in a very concrete way: he gives all he can. “Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.” So far as we can tell, Jesus doesn't tell him he has to do this. It's not a requirement Zacchaeus has to agree to before Jesus will come to his house. No, God's grace in Jesus, comes first. Zacchaeus giving is a willing, joyful response to God's gift of acceptance and love through Jesus. When no one else would, Jesus did. Zacchaeus decision to give is really about the sharing of joy and gratitude. He did not stop with earn and save but willingly responded by giving all he could.

When it comes to giving all we can, what does this mean? What is the formula? How do we determine when we have done so?

Wesley offered practical guidelines:

1. Provide things needful for yourself: food to eat, raiment to put on, whatever nature moderately requires for preserving the body in health and strength.
2. Provide these for your wife, your children, your servants, or any others who pertain to your household.
3. If, when this is done, there be an overplus left, then ‘do good to them that are of the household of faith.’
4. If there be an overplus still, ‘as you have opportunity, do good unto all men’ (p. 248, John Wesley, Albert Outler).

For Wesley—as for Zacchaeus—it isn't about tithing. Far more than that, it's about giving ALL we can which for some is far more than a tithing of 10%. For others it may be less. How you come to a decision on what that means for you is up to you. Yet, it is clear that faith and the use of money cannot be separated from one another, much as we might like to think so. How we use our money does in a very concrete way reveal what we value. As Jesus put it, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

Sometime I wish he hadn't taught that, but I believe it is true and that as such we are called to grow in our giving in ways that reflect a growing gratitude and joy for all of God's good gifts, chief among them is the experience of God's unconditional love, acceptance. It's not unlike the joy of an old woman who received humble homemade crafts from her neighborhood children, a joy that was cemented in the hearts of those children who learned what giving is really about: the experience of joyful giving out of deep gratitude.

I hope that is your experience as you are invited to consider your giving this morning. Those of you who have been around a while should have received a letter this last week with an estimate of giving card for 2016 enclosed, asking you to consider growing in your giving in 2016 as we continue to build God's kingdom here by fulfilling our vision to "create a church where children and youth love to attend" and our mission by "connecting people to the life and love of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." If you are new or relatively new to the church, we did not send them to you because we wanted you to know we are not after you for your money, but are simply glad to have you here. However, if you want to participate and you did not receive a card or forgot yours, there are cards in the pew racks. As music is played, prayerfully consider what it means for you to give all you can in 2016 and when you are ready, come forward and place your card on one of the baskets held by the children who represent our vision and mission.