



# Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## **Dangerous Gratitude**

A Sermon Preached by Ann Pettit

October 31, 2010

*Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)*

**Luke 19:1-10**

### **Luke 19:1-10**

*He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."*

This is the Word of the Lord;

**Thanks be to God.**

*“Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor;  
and if I have defrauded anyone of anything,  
I will pay back four times as much.”*

Did you ever wonder what happened next? You know...after Jesus left, and the dishes were put away, and the sun had set and there was just Zacchaeus and his thoughts in the quiet of the night.

That time of the night when, with *clarity that can be disturbing*, the meaning of what's happened, what we've done or said creeps in and we begin to think about tomorrow. We've all experienced it sometime. Maybe it was a signature on mortgage papers, or a resignation from one, known and comfortable job to take a new, as yet unknown job. Or perhaps we gave permission for a teenage child to travel with a group out of the country or agreed ourselves to lead a new program. Whatever it was, the excitement and energy and confidence with which we assented to those things can feel a long way off in the dark of the night, as the implications of what comes next begin to unfold.

I wonder what it was that Zacchaeus thought about as he lay down to rest for the evening. Was he thinking about who he had been just hours before when the sun first arose that morning? Did he think about the people he had cheated? Was he remembering Jesus' call to him to 'come down' and the sound of the crowd's murmuring about the company Jesus kept?

Somewhere deep inside, was the significance of his promise beginning to take hold? Was he wondering, with just a bit of fear, “what in the world have I done?” We can hardly blame him if he was. Zacchaeus had spent the majority of his professional life living well in a corrupt system. Tax collectors in Jesus' day weren't public servants, but rather served the Emperor first, taking the next best part for themselves all at the expense of the people; people who had no choice but to comply.

Tax collectors were crooks; they taxed anything and everything they could at a rate as high as they could, giving the Emperor only as much as they had to in order to stay in business. The rest they invested in themselves. And since Luke makes a point to tell us that Zacchaeus was the chief collector *and was rich* – we know he was very good at extracting money from the people.

He'd become accustomed to a style of living, and seeing people as objects to keep him living well. For years he had been part of a system in which his comfort came at the expense of others. And, as you might imagine, this didn't earn him much respect or affection within the community he lived and worked. In fact, tax collectors were careful to avoid crowds where an angry tax payer, in the midst of the hustle and bustle of a crowded market, might seek his revenge.

But then Jesus came to town, and despite the danger, Zacchaeus went out to see what all the commotion was about. He even climbed a tree to get a glimpse through the crowd.

Maybe this is our first hint that he was a restless soul. A professional – even a dis-

honest one - does not hike up his robes and climb up a tree; it's just not done. Yet Zacchaeus wanted to see – he wanted to see this man about whom the people were talking; he wanted to see for himself who was worthy of such interest and energy. It was probably a comical scene to watch if you were one of Rome's taxpayers: a wealthy, chief tax collector up in a tree!

But this wouldn't have been the first time the people got a laugh at Zacchaeus' expense. All who knew his name would have enjoyed the irony of it: Zacchaeus means, 'righteous one.' If we put the pieces together, Luke tells us, that a righteous tax collector is perched in a tree craning his neck to see Jesus, an enemy of the emperor pass by; an amusing sight to anyone paying attention.

And, as we know, Jesus was. Jesus saw him and reached out to him, not only speaking to him but entering his home and breaking bread. Imagine the tension in the crowds surrounding them as amusement at Zacchaeus in a tree gave way to anger. This man – *this tax collector* - was the one with whom Jesus chose to spend the day. They muttered amongst themselves about Jesus going into the home which had been purchased and furnished with the tainted money from his sinful profession.

What would this be like in our time: somebody living well off the hard work or misfortune of others? It's a familiar and timeless scenario, which can be heard in conversations near and far in our world today. Perhaps we've even had them ourselves. The frustration of the crowd as they watched Jesus and Zacchaeus walk away has been ours as well.

On the other hand, imagine what it was like for Zacchaeus. He had become accustomed to people avoiding and despising him. He was used to being suspicious of those around him and watching his back as he walked about. He was familiar with rejection and isolation Jesus turned his world upside down when out of everyone around him, Jesus chose Zacchaeus.

But that's the way Jesus is. He doesn't wait for us to get our acts together, before entering our lives. Rather, his entrance casts a spotlight on who and what we are while at the same time bringing us close in his unconditional embrace and love. His grace meets us and over takes us with life-changing force.

For Zacchaeus, that life-change meant he suddenly longed to be 'the righteous one' his name claimed for him. His gratitude at Jesus' love prompted repentance which gave way to a promise to make things right with those he'd defrauded. Suddenly, kindness that reached out to those in need became more important than Zacchaeus' own needs and wants.

Jesus announced that salvation had come to him and to his household. Zacchaeus was saved: saved from a life lived at the expense of others; saved from a life lived in service to a corrupt power; saved from an oblivious existence in a broken system.

We tend to think of salvation as a personal experience – one in which we are freed from sin and promised life everlasting. And while that's part of it - salvation means so much more. Jesus saved Zacchaeus – but it wasn't his own eternal future on which Zacchaeus dwelt. Rather Zacchaeus, perhaps for the first time, saw his life clearly and couldn't continue to live it in the same way. Salvation made Zacchaeus change what he was

and how he lived – and more importantly, *for whom he lived*.

Well, that brings us back to the beginning – did you ever wonder what happened next? Zacchaeus' gratitude changed his whole way of living. He didn't simply offer thanks – he offered himself to a ministry of restitution and charity. As he lay in his bed that night, did he see the faces of the people he'd cheated and wonder how he'd be received? Did he fear for his safety as he made his way to each person's home? Did he wonder how long would it take for them to receive and trust him?

And what about the comforts of life? Which ones would he do without? Did any pangs of regret enter in as he considered what he'd have to give up in order to follow through on his promise? Was he worried about how he'd make a living now that he'd given up the ways of tax collectors?

Zacchaeus' gratitude toward Jesus turned out to be a dangerous thing for his way of life. Having seen who he was with utter clarity and felt the deep love of Jesus, he could no longer be the same.

That's how it is when we encounter Jesus in our lives. Not just once, but over and over again, Jesus meets us where we are and we have a choice:

1. We can be thankful, enjoy the experience, and move on.
2. We can enter into the light that our gratitude sheds on who we are and what we've been.

The second is the dangerous choice – but it's also the one which changes us and then others as well. Consider Zacchaeus: going back to people he had cheated would have been humbling, and possibly physically dangerous – but his works of gratitude would leave them far better off than they'd ever been.

In just a few weeks Thanksgiving will be here – a time of year when we reflect both historically and personally on the ways in which God's blessings are present in our lives. This year the church will be busy with activity on Thanksgiving Day as our Middle School Youth, families and any other interested folks host a Thanksgiving dinner for our Food Pantry friends. We've had a big response to the invitation – and there are a lot of good plans being made - plans in which I hope you'll find a place to join.

It was intriguing to hear how this idea came to be. At one of their meetings early this year they were planning a Thanksgiving dinner together. As they talked, working out the details, it came to them to make this more than a meal for themselves, but to invite others to join them. In so doing, of course, the work involved and the number of people it would take to carry out this idea increased, along with the amount of food needed. But such details didn't stand in the way of these young people encountering Jesus as they considered the way in which they would show gratitude for the bounty they've received. Gratitude, deep life-changing gratitude, can make things more complicated – it can cause us to change what we're doing and how we're doing it. But gratitude for God's work in our lives is also the thing that moves ministry forward:

Gratitude is what happens when a group of people decide it's not right that they're warm and comfortable at night while others are sleeping outside in the cold of the winter;

Gratitude is what happens when we realize the kindness of others during a hard

time in our life enables us to enter into the life of another with such care and compassion;

Gratitude is what happens when we understand our connection to people far from us, whose lives are hard and uncertain, and we're compelled to learn more and live differently;

Gratitude is what happens when Jesus' love for us changes the way we see our enemy.

Where is gratitude for God's grace in your life leading you at this time? What new paths, new opportunities, new challenges are finding their way into your life as Jesus reaches out and embraces you just where you are today?

*Let us pray,*

*Jesus our Lord, give us eyes and ears and hearts to see, hear and receive your love in our lives. Prompt us to act with bold and decisive gratitude as we minister in your name. Through Christ we pray, Amen.*