

From Feeling to Action

Luke 19:1-10

When I started this sermon series on gratitude, there was one Bible verse that I decided I was not going to use: 1 Thessalonians 5:18, which says “Give thanks in all circumstances.” The reason I wanted to give that one a pass is because it has been co-opted by the inspirational thought industry and plastered all over cross stitch patterns, motivational posters, pious Facebook posts, and whatever you call that thing where you put some words on a hunk of wood, burn it around the edges, and slap it on the wall. The verse has become a bromide, a nice-sounding thought purchased as Christian home décor by Hobby Lobby shoppers, most of whom are pretty solidly middle-class. That just feels wrong to me inasmuch as Paul sent that word to a church that was going through severe persecution, to the point that some had been killed. For us comfortable American Christians, whose bad day is a day when the wifi is down, to turn that into a slogan felt smug to me.

But in the past couple of weeks, we’ve lost a layer of smug, haven’t we? Maybe at this point we are capable of some sympathy with those Thessalonians and can hear that verse as the shocking challenge that it was in the first century. Can we give thanks in all circumstances today? Because that would mean being grateful for family even as we are cooped up inside with them indefinitely – or separated from them by uncrossable distance or the windows of the nursing home. It would mean giving thanks for jobs that we just got laid off from, or that hang by a thread, and for homes whose rent or mortgages we aren’t sure we can pay now. It would mean giving thanks for the financial security of our savings, though they’re worth a third less than two weeks. It would mean giving thanks for friends we can’t visit, love we can’t express in person with a hug or a touch. It means giving thanks for health that we and those we love may not have tomorrow and for life that we suddenly realize can be cut short.

So, maybe we are able now to ask the question that the Thessalonians must have asked: Is it possible to be grateful in frightening times? And the answer is yes, but gratitude in times of trial is different from our usual thanksgiving. And deeper – because it is gratitude for blessings that are no longer taken for granted. In uncertain times, it is more difficult to delude ourselves

into thinking that our blessings are the result of our own hard work or brilliance. Instead, it finally occurs to us that we are always a step away from the precipice. Virus and recession and unexpected death are egalitarian. They don't care how special we are or how good we are. When that sinks in, when we realize that our deepest blessings are entirely unearned, then we can be grateful. Self-centeredness is inversely proportional to gratitude. When we start to let go of "self" as our organizing principle, we find it easier to be grateful; as we develop the habit of gratitude through practice we gain insight into how much we need other people and how much we need God, both of which lead to thankfulness. So yes, it is possible to give thanks in all circumstances, even our current ones, and that sort of gratitude is richer and stronger.

So now, maybe just a few minutes on what I had intended to talk about today, and let's begin by reading a familiar story, found in Luke 19, verses 1-10.

19 [Jesus] entered Jericho and was passing through it. 2A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax-collector and was rich. 3He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. 4So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. 5When 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.' 6So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. 7All who saw it began to grumble and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.' 8Zacchaeus 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.' 9Then Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. 10For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.'

Let's talk through the Zacchaeus story. Zacchaeus was a Jew who was working for the cruel, conquering Roman Empire – like a French collaborator with the Nazis in World War II. Worse, his particular job for the Romans was to collect taxes from his fellow Jews. You know how you feel about the IRS, right? Now imagine that the United States has been invaded and conquered by the naked aggression of a foreign power and now is crushed under the iron yoke and ruthless oppression of Canada – you heard it here first. So now the IRS is collecting taxes for our foreign overlords. Now how do you feel about the IRS, knowing that your taxes are going to pay for orgies in Ottawa? That's how Jews felt about people like Zacchaeus. And it gets worse. Remember a few weeks ago, when I talked about what the notion of *gratis* – gratitude – had

become in ancient Rome: a transactional system of payment for privilege? Well, it is almost certain that Zacchaeus would have gotten his position by means of bribes and kept it by means of kickbacks. Not just a traitor, but corrupt.

This is the person Jesus reached out to, and what Jesus gave him freely was exactly the thing that we all crave, but that Zacchaeus's wealth and purchased privilege could never give him: acceptance and friendship. Now you've heard sermons on this, and some of those probably suggested that what happened was that Jesus, with his Son-of-God-like insight, looked at Zacchaeus and saw that deep inside he was a good person. A diamond in the rough who just needed a chance. The text doesn't say he was a good person. All we know about Zacchaeus is that he was a corrupt collaborator with one of the most murderous empires in history. Here, try this: imagine the most corrupt political figure that you can think of. I'll give you a minute. Think of one? Good. Now imagine Jesus picking that person out of the crowd to reach out to in friendship. Do you find that a little offensive? Or a lot? Good, because that's how the Jews surely felt when Jesus invited himself over to Zacchaeus's house. But that's what Jesus did; he chose the most despicable person in town. You see, befriending people who secretly have a heart of gold isn't grace; it's smart policy. Jesus doesn't do policy; Jesus does grace.

Now it's worth pointing out that giving people undeserved acceptance is not a high-percentage game. The chances are good that your gift will be rejected or abused. This time, though, Zacchaeus chose to accept it. Perhaps he had reached the point of realizing that all he had been priding himself on achieving in life had only made him ugly and pathetic. At any rate, he chose to be loved rather than privileged. And how did he express his gratitude for Jesus' gift? "Half my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor. As for those I have cheated, I will make it right."

Gratitude. Most of the time, we think of gratitude as an emotion, a feeling. Our thank you notes stress how the gift has made us feel, and when we write in gratitude journals what we're trying to do muster the feeling of thankfulness. We talk about having an "attitude of gratitude." None of this is wrong. Feelings are important, and feelings of thankfulness are more important than most. An "attitude of gratitude" is way better than an "attitude of resentment." But feeling

grateful isn't enough, just like feeling love isn't enough. Unless our feelings lead to action, our feelings are incomplete. How did Zacchaeus show his gratitude? He recognized that he had been given a precious gift that he did not deserve and asked himself, "What do I have that I can give to others with that same generosity?"

So let's close with that. The past few weeks have laid bare our own frailty, and we have seen how precariously our former sense of well-being is balanced on the edge of circumstance. We still have many blessings, but we might have begun to realize now that they are undeserved. As a virus circles the globe, snatching breath away from hundreds of thousands, we realize that our every breath is a gift. How should we express our gratitude for that gift? Not just by remembering to say thank you, but by giving to others so long as we have breath. And we have been. This past week – the day before all gatherings of more than 50 people were banned – we came together to grieve with Tom Jewell and to remember how Kathi gave so generously to the lives of others. Also this past week, volunteers from our church kept our commitment to the Beacon House homeless shelter for families. Some brought food; others stayed overnight. Because those who do not have a home to self-isolate in need help. Next Sunday afternoon, we could still use a few volunteers as we cook a meal and serve it in To-Go boxes at the Community Table. Call the office to sign up. And, by the way, thank God for people like Tashai and the Community Table team, who are, if anything, even more determined to care for the hungry in a time of national emergency.

As the weeks stretch out ahead of us without horizon, we as a church are also looking toward a time when some of our elders who definitely should not be out of their homes may run out of groceries or meds. Without even being asked, three different people have come to me and said that they would do those shopping trips. We've started a list. If you want on that list – either as a shopper or a person who needs a shopper – call the office. And everyone here has a gift to give to those who are lonely. Make a call. God has been amazingly good to us, giving us love and forgiveness and hope that by any objective standard we have not deserved. That's a good feeling. Now, do something with it.

CS: Tell a story. Pretend you're a grandmother, and you've made two sweaters for two of your grandchildren. Now only one writes a thank you note. How does that make you feel? But over the next year, you see the other one – who didn't write a thank you – wearing the sweater all the time, but you never see the one who wrote the note wearing his. Then one day, while visiting your grandchildren you see that one's sweater shoved in the back of a closet, covered with other junk. Now how do you feel? Which child do you think appreciated the gift more?

It is important to say thank you for gifts. But what really makes a giver feel good is to see that their gift is loved and being used as it was intended. In the same way, we *should* say thank you to God, but the next step is use God's gifts as they are intended. And God's gifts are *always* intended to share with other people. Pray.