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Luke 19:1-10

MONEY MATTERS

Money can buy us many things. It can buy us cars and electronics, houses and clothing, trips and education, food and medical care. Money also buys us intangible things like privilege, and status, and acceptance.

This becomes really evident when you travel. Tim and I just returned from a trip to see our son in Spain, and during our travels I was able to witness the various ways that money buys these very important but intangible things like privilege and status and acceptance. It used to be that there were just two categories of airline passengers: those in first class and those in economy. But now, there are multiple classifications which enable passengers of various economic levels to grasp as much status and privilege as their incomes will permit: there are diamond passengers, comfort plus passengers, sky priority passengers. And there is no doubt that when your special category gets called to board the plane ahead of the others, and when you settle into your seat that is a fraction of an inch wider than those in economy, you feel special. What really lies behind that special feeling is not that we are somehow more deserving. It's just that we have more money. And that money pays people to treat us nicely, to give us nice things, and to make us feel important.

Airline travel illustrates what we often want money to do for us. Certainly we want the comforts that money can buy us. But we also want money to separate us from others. If everyone on an airplane were treated with the same comforts as those in first class, what would be special about that? We want our money to separate us from others.

But separation from others isn't healthy for us as individuals or for us as a community. That is what is taking place in our story about Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus is a chief tax collector. While few among us like paying the tax man, tax collectors in Jesus' day were especially despised. Tax collectors were members of the Jewish community who collaborated with the Roman Empire to collect the extreme taxes levied on the Jewish people.

On top of being traitors to their own people, tax collectors were also permitted by the Roman authorities to add on their own commission to the taxes. Rome didn't care as long as Rome got the amount it wanted. So tax collectors often exploited the already impoverished members of their community by adding on excessive commissions to the taxes they collected. And there was nothing any one could do about it. They had to pay or face Rome's cruelty. So tax collectors got rich from a system that gouged their own struggling people. They got rich from an evil system of oppression. And they were despised for this.

Not only were they despised, tax collectors were considered to be "sinners" by their own people—a category that not only implied some moral deficiency but also denoted a condition of impurity. Tax collectors were considered unclean, and as thus, were to be avoided.

Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector which tells us how deeply embedded he was into this system of oppression. And he had gotten rich from his participation in this system. Certainly that meant he enjoyed life's comforts. But his choices also alienated from his own people. And this meant he was also alienated from the person God intended for him to be. Zacchaeus' money created a gap, a gaping chasm of separation between himself and his community and between himself and his God.

Notice however how Jesus responds to this gap. Where everyone else wants to avoid this sinner, Jesus draws close. Jesus sees Zacchaeus up there in the tree and says to him, "Zacchaeus,

hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” And even though people openly criticized Jesus for associating with such a sinner, Jesus goes to Zacchaeus’ home. We have no indication from the story that Jesus rebuked Zacchaeus for his oppressive practices, that Jesus demanded that Zacchaeus change his ways or repent. All we know is that by inviting himself into Zacchaeus’ home, Jesus bridged the gap that Zacchaeus had created for himself with his money.

And somehow, by welcoming Jesus into his home, Zacchaeus is transformed. Maybe he was able to see himself through Jesus’ eyes. Maybe he could see his worth and his own capacity to be someone other than an exploiter of the poor. Maybe Jesus’ acceptance and grace touched Zacchaeus’ heart in such a way that Zacchaeus realized he could use his money in a new way. Instead of his money being a source of separation between himself and others, his money could become a unifier. And so, transformed by grace, Zacchaeus pledges to make reparations to both the poor and to those he had defrauded—to those he had wronged both directly and indirectly. Zacchaeus demonstrates a resurrected spirit. He has a new relationship with money that is manifested in a new relationship with other people. He is not only transformed by welcoming Jesus into his home, but Zacchaeus himself *becomes* an agent of transformation for others.

Money is never just a personal matter. Money is always a social matter. How we got it. How we use it. Who it benefits. Who it leaves out. Zacchaeus’ money and how he acquired it and how he used it had direct implications on his society and community. The same is true with our money.

And money is always a spiritual matter. It reveals our loyalties, our priorities, our values, and where we place our trust.

Intentional use of our money can become an important spiritual discipline. A discipline is a behavior we practice doing over and over again. Like exercising to stay healthy or brushing our teeth for good oral hygiene, giving our money away is a discipline we practice for our spiritual health. That is the philosophy behind pledging. Once a year, the church comes to its members and asks them to pledge their financial gifts for the upcoming year. Some people are uncomfortable with pledging because they don't want to promise something they cannot guarantee they can deliver on.

But the church is never going to send debt collectors after someone who doesn't pay their pledge. Sometimes life circumstances arise—a death, a loss of a job, an unexpected financial hardship of some kind—and people discover that they might have to decrease their pledge mid-year. That's life. And the church understands.

But here is why making a pledge is a good spiritual discipline. Pledging to support the church weekly or monthly means that we followers of Jesus are making giving a regular part of our lives. We aren't waiting for our heartstrings to be tugged by some emotional plea. We aren't waiting to first use our money for our needs and wants and wishes and then give whatever might be left over. Instead, we commit right up front to making giving something we do regularly, whether we always feel like it or not.

Of course, the church conducts stewardship because it has financial needs. But the stewardship of our money is not just about keeping the lights on. If the church won the lottery and had no need for any additional money, we would still have an obligation to teach and promote the stewardship of our money. And that is because we *need* to give. You and I have a spiritual need to give our money away and all parts of our lives away. We need to practice being generous people. That is part of our spiritual health. Giving is a way we humans stay connected

to one another, the way we bridge the abundant gaps that exist in our world between those who have and those who lack, between racial divides and social divides, and religious divides. God created us to be generous people and giving is the way we stay connected to who God created us to be.

The Zacchaeus story prods us to consider the ways money creates a gap in our own lives. In what ways might our money alienate us from others? Or from who God created us to be? In what ways could our money be used to unite us with others, to bring about healing, to make reparations for past wrong doings, as Zacchaeus is moved to do?

Notice that when Jesus invites himself to Zacchaeus' home, Jesus says, "I *must* stay at your house today." Jesus indicates that coming to Zacchaeus' home is an important and even urgent matter. For Jesus, healing the separations we create for ourselves, the divisions that exist between ourselves and God's love, the divisions our money and self-centered habits create between us and one another, for Jesus this *is* an urgent and important matter. And so Jesus invites himself in—into your home and my home—so that like Zacchaeus, we may be transformed. And so the lost will be found.