

GENEROSITY

I grew up in a home where politeness was a high value. You learned the “magic word” at an early age, you didn’t talk with your mouth full.

And I’m pretty sure that somewhere in my politeness education, I learned that you don’t invite yourself over to another person’s home. You could invite others to your home, or you could drop subtle or not-so-subtle hints, but you weren’t supposed to say, “Hey Bill, why don’t you have me over to your house for dinner today?” It wasn’t polite to do that in Montgomery or in Palestine, either.

The thing is, politeness is not one of Jesus’ top values. I don’t think he was much interested in it at all. Jesus doesn’t seem to think twice about inviting himself over to a stranger’s house and there’s a good reason for it. Jesus is out to seek and save the lost: there’s no time for worrying about being polite.

Luke 19:1-10 we find Zacchaeus.

Zacchaeus is not a widow or an orphan, he’s not poor, he’s not a foreigner living in a strange land. Zacchaeus is a tax collector—a chief tax collector, according to Luke—and he’s rich. It may sound to us like he’s a person who’s got it made—a steady job in upper management, a good salary, some measure of authority.

He may have all those things, but as a tax collector, Zacchaeus is an outsider in his hometown. Tax collectors were usually local folks who worked for Rome, collecting funds from their friends and neighbors to fund the military occupation of their own country. And if that’s not enough to make them unlikeable, tax collectors were expected to make their living through dishonesty, by gouging those they collected from for extra cash. The local tax collector may have had one of the bigger houses, but he was not the most popular guy on the block.

So Zacchaeus is a great example of what wealth can’t do. It can provide for physical needs; it can provide some measure of security; it can provide entertainment and comfort. But wealth can’t buy happiness, or the deep fulfillment we’re made for. We sometimes get the idea that it can, but Jesus knows better.

trouble—there is too much evidence on the subject and it is overwhelming.” Jesus knows you can be “rich in things and poor in spirit”; you can be a wealthy person and very lost. And as this story makes clear, Zacchaeus is a great example.

Jesus enters the city of Jericho on his way to Jerusalem. He’s a famous prophet and teacher and healer by now, and crowds tend to show up where he does. The streets of the town are lined with people when he arrives, and somewhere in the back of the crowd, he sees something he doesn’t see in most of the towns he visits: a man clinging to a tree branch, watching every move he makes, straining to hear every word.

Jesus could have been polite. He could have made a mental note that this guy looked like someone he ought to talk to later. He could have politely taken him aside to find out what had him interested enough to climb a tree like a child. But instead, Jesus stops where he is, looks up, and in front of everyone, calls out: “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today” (Luke 19:5).

Jesus calls out to this imperfect but eager stranger like they’re friends, letting everyone in the crowd know that he’s not staying at the Holiday Inn tonight, and he’s not staying at the mayor’s house. He’s staying with Zacchaeus.

Jesus isn’t polite in this story—he’s something so much more than that. He’s generous. He’s generous, because staying in someone’s home in Jesus’ time meant more than friendship: it meant acceptance. It meant you aligned yourself with the host. Jesus made a public display of it, made sure everyone knew he accepted Zacchaeus, the chief tax-collector, the guy no one accepted.

It’s the way God’s love works, after all. God doesn’t wait until we’ve got it all together, but simply comes to us with words of hope: words that we are accepted as we are, with our flaws and our sins and our self-absorption. God calls His own, by name, out of whatever tree we perch in, called out with words of love.

Jesus is generous with Zacchaeus, and generosity is, in turn, the way Zacchaeus responds, pledging to give half of his possessions to the poor and to repay anyone he has defrauded fourfold. This is wild, reckless generosity, beyond anything the law required, beyond what was deemed right and acceptable.

And in the midst of the action, we find that this has been a story about salvation.

“Today salvation has come to this house,” Jesus tells Zacchaeus and the crowds around him. I know that word can bring up all kinds of complex, cosmic connotations for people about salvation, but at its root, salvation is about healing. The Greek word for salvation comes from the same root as “salve”—salvation is ultimately a healing of that which is broken in us. In receiving the generous action of Jesus and responding in generosity, a deep healing takes place for Zacchaeus. Something broken in him is made whole again.

The wind blowing through the trees, the breath in our lungs, the clothing on our backs and the roof over our heads, the cars that brought us here and the extra hour of sleep we got last night: all of it is gift, and all of it belongs to God.

Generosity comes from remembering that all of life is a gift and all of it belongs to God. It comes from realizing the ways God is extravagantly generous with us and then responding as best we can. It’s what we’re made to do, and when we stop, something is bound to feel “off.”

I know talking about money often isn’t considered any more polite than inviting yourself to someone else’s home for dinner. But we’re about something more than politeness here, too. We’re about feeding the sheep where ever the call may be.