

Christians, Guilt, and Wealth

According to Loren Mead in his book, *Transforming Congregations for the Future*, “A primary spiritual task of churches is to help Americans deal with the dilemmas of wealth.” However, we continually avoid this issue because it is truly the primary spiritual problem of every American Christian - we are wealthy. Even our poorest are better off than the poor elsewhere in the world. However, for most of us as middle class Americans, the issue seems to be guilt; guilt because we have while others have not, guilt because everything we read in the Bible indicates that wealth and salvation are incompatible; guilt because we have more money than someone else; guilt because we think we ought to be guilty. In the Old Testament, it seemed that wealth was an indication of God’s blessing; but in the New Testament, it seemed to be an indication of a closed mind. In Luke 12:13-21 we have the parable of the rich fool: a man is blessed with abundance and he responds with self-congratulations and conversations with himself. Family, neighbors, God; all are absent from his plans. In Luke 16:13 The Pharisees are called the lovers of money; basically urban and business people not unlike us. Jesus tells them that you cannot serve wealth and God at the same time. In Luke 18:18-25, we have the rich, young ruler who is told to be saved, he must give up all he has. He cannot trust the securities of wealth; he must trust God alone. Only God can provide salvation and does so through Christ. In these cases, wealth is a barrier to a relationship with God. So much so that it seems Jesus would have us be poor to be saved. However, I don’t think this is the message for us middle class Christians.

I think the message that speaks to the point is found in the story of Zacchaeus. This is one biblical story where the main character ‘overcomes’ his wealth. Even as a wealthy person, Zacchaeus knows that money isn’t giving him power over his life; it doesn’t fulfill his being; it doesn’t replenish his spirit. Something is still missing in his life. Here is a wealthy man with power in the political structure of the times who seems to have everything one could want in life. Yet he is seeking Jesus; this is not the act of a complacent or satisfied person. Such a person does not need to seek others; in fact, others usually gravitate to people such as Zacchaeus. The act of trying to see Jesus shows a desperate need for something more in his life; something beyond the material, a search for fulfillment.

Zacchaeus is Hebrew for pure and righteous. In the eyes of his fellow Hebrews, he was anything but pure and righteous. He was a tax collector, in fact, the chief tax collector - someone with power over the lives of the Hebrews. He was considered a traitor to his nation and its ancient faith in the one invisible God. He was responsible for causing the Hebrews to have a significant release of their resources - a reduction in their blessings. His power over them certainly did not provide him with their acceptance. Just imagine: in Jericho, a wealthy suburb of Jerusalem, the chief tax collector wants to see Jesus - a man who is known to eat with tax collectors and sinners. However, Zacchaeus has this problem; he is, according to Luke, short of stature, and he is trying to get a peek at the Master. As with every entry of Jesus into a city, the way was lined with people, some curious, some desperate, some just there, but all in some way drawn to be a part of Jesus' coming. Zacchaeus is feverishly trying to weave his way through the crowds, pushing, straining, jumping, and bouncing to get a view of Jesus. But it is no use, there are too many people; they are all too tall; he has no friends who will give him cuts in line. So he runs on ahead. Imagine how desperate he is to try to run through a crowd seeking a destination that he cannot see, but knowing that there must be some place where he can get a view of Jesus. This is not a happy man - Luke tells us that he was a chief tax collector and rich. The rich is added almost as an epitaph as if it explains the lack of fulfillment, the desperation in his life. What good does wealth do him if he couldn't get seats on the 50-yard line? Finally he sees a tree, something higher than the crowd. This is the answer; all he has to do is get to the tree and climb up in it.

Obviously an act of a man of dignity and power - it's amazing what Jesus causes us to do!

He is up in the tree and as comfortable as the situation allows when he sees Him. The moment of achievement - now he can go home.

... but wait what do I see -- Jesus is calling and beckoning to me.

There's more, I can't just see Jesus and go home with my life unchanged. He is now a part of me and I am a part of Him. I now have a responsibility for the privilege of having Jesus in my life. The burden of an empty life is replaced with the burden of responding to God's grace. Here it is

again - that unexpected gift of redemption, that undeserved gift of salvation. For as Luke says, “truly salvation has come to this house.”

Jesus calls Zacchaeus down much to the dismay and chagrin of the crowd. He is doing it again, why can't Jesus pick out a law-abiding Hebrew; why another tax collector, a sinner? Do you think He does it because it makes good press or because He likes to make people uncomfortable? By the time Zacchaeus scrambles down from the tree and joyfully receives Jesus in his home, the crowd is berserk with frustration and displeasure. Jesus certainly made them uncomfortable. When they are alone, Zacchaeus responds to this gift of grace by telling Jesus that he will give half his goods to the poor. Jesus responds by proclaiming salvation upon Zacchaeus' house and that He has come to save the lost (sheep, coins, prodigals, and all; even short, misunderstood tax collectors). Zacchaeus is certainly fulfilled; his search is over, but the burden is just beginning.

Now you ask what does all this have to do with wealth and guilt? Or should I subtitle this: stewardship and giving? Well, at least two aspects to the story are linked to stewardship. The most obvious one is the discussion of giving half his goods to the poor. This act is not an attempt to assuage his guilt, nor is it an attempt to buy Christ's favor. It is a direct response to the amazing news that God created us, loves us, and calls us. For the first time in his life, Zacchaeus is giving away wealth without expecting something in return. That is the message of us. Our giving is in response to the Good News - In life and in death we belong to God. All that we are, all that we have is God's. Like Zacchaeus we can be good stewards by using our material success, our wealth wisely to a positive end. We are all stewards, but by doing it wisely we can be good stewards responding in faith to God's gift of grace. The fundamental idea of Christian Giving is that of the need of the giver to give.

All my resources and income, present and future, belong to God. I administer these things for God, and in so doing, I am guided by what the Scripture tells me about the tithe. As the giver, I have a need to sacrifice to give generously to God. Sacrifice means to make sacred. To make a thing sacred means to give up its use to God rather than use it for your own purpose. When I am challenged to give sacrificially, I reevaluate my attitude toward money and the things money can buy. In spending my money for things that have spiritual value, I begin to discover more about

what my spiritual values are. I need to give because together with others I have accepted a responsibility to God and others. This is what separates the Christian giver from those donating to charitable foundations. My gift, your gift is an act of worship. In our giving is found our priorities. If we are only giving a token amount to the church and its activities, then some other aspect of our lives is commanding our attention. God does not need our money, but we need to express our gratitude. What we do with our money reflects what we believe.

Sacrifice involves risk, just like the risk that Zacchaeus took to see Jesus. He risked foolishness for his faith or maybe because of his desperation. Risk, or acting out on faith, is an essential component in responsible discipleship. Faith always involves risk, that step into the unknown doing what may be regarded as foolish, but doing it because we have been given the responsibility. Astonishing accomplishments are within our grasp if we heed God's call, take the risk of faith, give our lives in service to God, and be good stewards of that which we are given. We have been chosen. Our failure to respond to that gift of grace doesn't negate it; God doesn't give grace based on our response. God created us and continually assures us of love and acceptance. Nothing we as humans have done or could ever do can earn this relationship with God. It is freely given; we must take the risk and accept it.

A minister took his little boy with him one night to supply on a Sunday evening for a small country congregation. At the entrance to the church, they passed a little table with a box on it and a sign which read "Alms Box." Not much of a name to be sure, but it wasn't much of a church. Reaching into his pocket, the preacher took out fifty cents and dropped it in. When the service was over, one of the deacons approached. "Reverend, we have a custom in this church of paying our evening minister the contents of the alms box." Whereupon he removed the lid, poured the money into the preacher's hand -- One lone fifty-cent piece! As they made their way to the car, the precocious youngster turned to his father and said, "hey, dad, I just thought of something. If you'd have put more in, you'd have gotten more out.

That's the risk we all have to take.

In last month's Presbytidings, I wrote about something I called the unexpected e offering or the RISK offering. What does that mean? Well, I am suggesting that each of us take a risk and pledge 10% of all unexpected income to the church. These can be monies such as your tax refund, a check in the mail as a rebate, or even an inheritance. Why is this a risk offering – because when that money arrives, giving to the church is often the last thing on our minds. I am suggesting that we take the risk and automatically dedicate one-tenth (a tithe) of that to the church. The pledge can be written down or just taken to heart; but the important thing is that we accept the risk. If we put more in, we will get more out.

Why do we feel guilty about wealth and particularly money? To many of us, money is how we determine our self-worth. We receive money through our employment. In many cases, we are not comfortable with what we do or don't believe we are adequately rewarded for our efforts. But we don't want the rest of the world to know. Money is power. The power to control our lives to have what we want to do what we will to keep the world at bay. Yet it doesn't work that way. The world comes crashing in, we can't buy the happiness and security that satisfies. The problem lies in the fact that it isn't our money. Money or wealth is a resource that comes from God and is ours to use for God's purposes.

Our choice lies in what we do with wealth, how well we fulfill our responsibilities as stewards of God's resources. We want to do this well because God has given to us gifts, blessings, and talents. The act of doing our responsibility well is a response to God's gifts to us. This is a way of tangibly expressing our appreciation for what God has done for us. We need to respond to the grace of God, to say "alleluia" to the good news of Christ Jesus - and to say it not just with our mouths, but with our lives and livelihoods. It is our calling to live in the world as those who believe that God loves us, forgives us and has chosen us. That is not only the Good News, it is the best and most valued thing about us. Stewardship is asking, "How can I respond to such a thing?" In fact, how can we not respond - we have been incredibly blessed. We have the privilege of responding; for without the gift, - there would be no need of a response.

The monetary response is up to each of us. But remember, the church is asking for sacrificial giving - making sacred, giving up to God's use. Sometimes I think that this is too much. Then, I

remember the story of the successful consultant. He had a problem. He was a tither and now he was making so much money that even 10 percent seemed an enormous amount. In fact, it staggered him every month when he wrote his check for the Lord. So he called his preacher; they had been friends a long time. In fact when he started his business, the two of them had prayed together and the consultant had promised a faithful tithe of all he took in. So he and his old friend went over the problem. They talked and thought; suddenly, the pastor had an inspiration. "I've got it. The only way. We can get on our knees and ask the Lord to reduce your income so your tithe will be more bearable. "

Take a risk and respond generously, and see if you don't get more out when you put more in. The church is not asking for more than you have. It is not like the bank which one comedian satirized by asking: Why is it that when you bounce a check, they charge you more of what they **know** you haven't got any of? Remember, what we have is not ours, but is God's that we are caring for. Instead of "giving" the Lord a share of "our" money, sometimes a bit grudgingly, as checks for benevolence are written, we simply have the responsibility - surely a joyous one - of administering what was already God's. Why don't you take out what is to be returned to the Lord first and keep it separate? Then it never actually becomes "OURS." The fact of giving OUR money never becomes easy to us, but returning a portion of what we have obtained with the Lord's blessings is a joyful response to the gift of grace.

Growing up in the sixties, one of my favorite musical groups was the Kingston Trio. I remember when I got one of their greatest hit records, mostly for Rev. Mr. Black and Tom Dooley. But there was another song on that record that immediately became a favorite. It's a song called Desert Pete. When I listened to it last night, it reminded me of the story of Zacchaeus, of taking risks, having faith, and receiving unexpected grace.

I was traveling west, a buckskin. On my way to a cattle run.
Across a little cactus desert, under a hot blistering sun.
I was thirsty down to my boot heels. Stopped to rest me on a stump.
But I tell you, I just couldn't believe it when I saw that water pump.

I took it to be a mirage at first, It'll fool a thirsty man.
But then I saw a note stuck in a baking powder can.
This pump is old, the note began, but she works so give her a try.
I put a new sucker washer in her, you may find the leather dry.

Yea, you'll have to prime the pump, work that handle like there's a fire.
Under that rock you'll find some water I left in a bitters jar.
Now there's just enough to prime it with so don't you go drinking first.
You just pour it in and pump like mad. Buddy you'll quench your thirst.

Well I found that jar and I tell you nothing was ever prettier to my eye.
I was tempted strong to drink it cause that pump looked mighty dry.
But the note went on, have faith my friend there's water down below.
You've got to give before you get. I'm the one who ought to know.

So I poured in the jar and I started pumpin' and I heard a beautiful sound
Of water bubblin' and splashin' up outta that hole in the ground
I took off my shoes and I drunk my fill of that cool refreshing treat
I thank the Lord and thank the pump and I thank old Desert Pete

You've got to prime the pump, you must have faith and believe.
You've got to give of yourself fore you're worthy to receive.
Drink all the water you can hold, wash your face, cool your feet.
But leave the bottle full for others. Thank you kindly Desert Pete.

So have faith my friends and respond generously to God's gifts of unexpected, undeserved grace.
Leave the bottle full for others.

It is not the wealth that you have but rather what you do with the wealth that makes you who you are. If we feel guilt about wealth, then we have not responded to God's gift, we have not made the sacrifice. Yet the Good News is, there are always opportunities for redemption. Even

Zacchaeus, that wealthy man, found redemption. Grace abounds for truly salvation has come to this house!