

JOY AND GENEROSITY
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church
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Luke 19:1-10

Not long ago I was talking to a young couple who recently joined a Presbyterian church. They said they had really enjoyed the church, and their children were getting involved. But then, they said, came pledge Sunday, with cards available for everyone to sign to make a pledge. Sound familiar? The wife said: "I know the minister didn't mean it this way, but we didn't like it. The whole process made us feel guilty."

I know the minister of that church, and I know he did not mean it that way. But that is what that couple heard: You've got to give, give, give, or feel guilty if you don't.

Here's what I want to say to that couple, and to any of you who are feeling the same way: The amount that you owe the church—is zero. The ledger is clean. Let your guilt be taken away. You owe nothing; you must do nothing; you must perform nothing. If you give not a dime, you belong to this church just as much as anyone else.

That is an answer, I suppose, that horrifies the stewardship committee. If people don't give to support the church, then what happens? How do we pay the preacher, pay the light bill, support missionaries? I guess the short answer to that is: We'd figure it out, and go forward.

But the larger question is: Why give? You take away a little good old-fashioned guilt, and you take away the bottom line of the church's budget as a goal for everyone to meet. What's left?

What's left is grace. It's not that we preach grace 51 Sundays a year and then on Commitment Sunday suddenly gig everyone with guilt. Rather, today is about God's grace as well, maybe more on this day than any other. It is God who has redeemed us in Christ, received us in love, forgiven us by the cross.

Why give? I give in joyful response to God's grace. My giving is connected to my heart. Joy and generosity are two side of the same thing.

Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he.

He climbed up in a sycamore tree, for the Lord he wanted to see.

Not only was Zacchaeus a wee little man; he was also a hated tax collector. His job, his work, was to collect, and keep, and hoard. He made his money by collecting more than was legal, and skimming his share off the top. Tax collectors, as you might imagine, were not the most popular people in Palestine.

But then Jesus looked up in the tree, and saw him, and called him, and stayed at his house. The people murmured, because they didn't want this guy getting grace. Zacchaeus, for his part, responded in two ways. First, it says "he received [Jesus] joyfully." There's joy here. And second, his joy put in him a generosity. "The half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have cheated anyone, I'll pay them back four times as much." Joy and generosity.

"Joy" was not a popular concept in the Roman world. There was "a profound pessimism concerning life."¹ The view was that the Roman gods didn't care much about human life, so human beings just got along the best they could. So there wasn't much discussion of anything like joy. What did they have to be joyful about?

But the Christian faith dares just in that world, as in ours, to proclaim joy. By joy we mean more than just going to Dollywood or a Titans game. Those can be fun, but joy is so much deeper. Joy is the knowledge that God has said Yes—Yes to us and Yes to our world. The 14th-century English mystic Julian of Norwich put it this way: "All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well."² We know that there is plenty of evidence to the contrary—war and hunger and fires in California, and terrible tragedies in our lives. But underneath, this confidence in the ultimate goodness and triumph of God. And that is cause for joy.

We don't always do the best job of showing it. The philosopher Frederick Nietzsche criticized the Christians of his day by saying: "Jesus' disciples should look more redeemed."³ But when we truly hear the gospel, when we know that we are redeemed and that "all manner of things will be well," then we respond with joy.

And so of course that joy leads to gratitude. Karl Barth says that "to be joyful is to look out for opportunities for gratitude."⁴

¹ L Gregory Bloomquist, "Subverted by Joy: Suffering and Joy in Paul's Letter to the Philippians." *Interpretation*, July 2007, p. 271.

² John Ortberg, "Hunger for Joy." *The Christian Century*, September 4, 2007. p. 39.

³ Paul Tillich, *The New Being* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), p. 142.

⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III. 4, p. 376.

Here is a man who is in love with a woman. He proposes marriage to her, and miracle of miracles, she accepts! He is filled with joy. He goes into the local bar—“Drinks on the house!” That’s what happens when you’re joyous—you instinctively want to be generous.

Zacchaeus received Jesus joyously, so of course he wanted to give to those in need.

A woman was telling me about her son. They had found a suspicious growth on his skin, and needed to take it off. She prayed fervently for her son before he went in for the procedure. The thing was done, and turned out to be harmless—no cancer. A few weeks later she was called by the presbytery where she lives, asking if she would serve on a presbytery committee. Her first response was the same one I would give: Find somebody else. But then she thought: God gave me back the life of my son. How grateful I am for that? So of course I will serve.

Joy leads to generosity. That is why we give. We are joyous in the Lord. I guess it’s possible to give out of guilt—I gotta do it!!—but that’s a poor motivator, and not nearly as much fun. I am joyous, I am grateful, so I give.

Then another thought: Is it possible for the reverse to take place. My joy leads me to be generous. Can my generosity lead me to be joyous? Can you be all grumpy and out of sorts, and then you give something away, and it makes you joyous? Can my wallet jump start my heart?

I was in a stewardship conference many years ago. The leader said: “I want you to take out whatever change you’ve got in our pocket or purse.” When we did that, she said: “Now I want you to walk around and give away as much as you can.” So we started walking around in the big room, a couple of hundred people, pressing coins into each other’s hands, seeing who could give away the most. And the temperature of the room heated up with hilarity. It as great fun. The exercise in giving made us joyful. Then the leader got us to settle down, and said: “Now I want you to keep your money, and see how much you can get from others.” Now we walked around, keeping our fists closed. Our mouths were closed, too. The temperature of the room cooled considerably—no laughter, no fun. It was a complete transformation.

There’s a place in the Presbyterian *Book of Order*, that staid statement, that makes this remarkable affirmation:

Those who follow the discipline of Christian stewardship will find themselves called to lives of simplicity, generosity, honesty, hospitality, compassion, receptivity, and concern for the earth and God’s creatures.⁵

Wow! Do you want to find your life simpler, generous, honest? Do you want to be hospitable, more compassionate, more welcoming to others? Do you want to be concerned about God’s

⁵ W-5.5005

creation? Then be a steward. Give of yourself and your possessions, and all that other will kick in for you.

Joy leads to generosity, and generosity leads to joy. It runs both ways.

Just one other matter: Why give to the church? Why not give it to the United Way, or the Family Center, or some other charitable agency?

I hope you do give to those other agencies. They do much good. But if I may be personal, I give the greatest amount of my money to the church. I give to the church, with all its imperfections, because here is the place, more than any other, where Jesus is made visible in our world. I love Jesus, and this is where I see Jesus at work—in the work of our youth, in mission trips taken by individuals and groups, in gifts given to people in need. Jesus comes alive for me in this place when I am with all of you. Here is where I give my possessions and myself.

So here's the word for today. First is this: remember, you don't owe a thing—zip, zero, nada. The price has been paid by Jesus. If you give, do it because you want to, not because you've got to. The world says: "I never have quite enough. If I just had a couple more thousand a year, I could make it." Our faith says: "You've got enough, if only you have eyes to see it. God doesn't want what we don't have. Whatever we give is not out of obligation or compulsion, but as a free gift—giving as a joy.

The Biblical standard is 10%. That's pretty high by our reckoning. Maybe you can't do that. Just start somewhere. The hardest percentage increase is not from 7% to 10%, or from 10% on out beyond. The hardest is from zero to 1%, from the occasional, casual gift, to the regular disciplined giving of yourself and what you possess.

I could give you statistics on how we do. Here's the one I'm proudest of: In 2007 we had about 20 children and youth who make their own pledge to the church. In terms of dollars received, it is not our biggest source of income. In terms of young people learning of gratitude to God, their gift is of inestimable value.

Let the children lead you. Give in gratitude, in joy. It will change your life.✠