

Rev. Mary Bea Sullivan, Proper 26C, October 30, 2016
The Episcopal Church of the Holy Spirit, Alabaster, AL
Isaiah 1: 10 - 18, Psalm 32: 1 - 7, 2 Thessalonians 1: 1 - 4, 11 - 12, Luke 19:1-10

Most likely Zacchaeus was not invited to many parties. Not only was he a tax collector, collaborating with the Roman oppressors, he was the CHIEF tax collector. A big job, but Zacchaeus was a small man.

I love the visual of him running down the road, and scrambling up a sycamore tree to get a glimpse of the renowned healer and teacher. We could almost imagine his resentful neighbors laughing and taunting—“What’s the matter Zacchaeus, too short to see Jesus?”

Undeterred, Zacchaeus waits, watches, and is rewarded with an invitation from Jesus, “hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” Zacchaeus, we learn, was happy to welcome Jesus into his home.

It is not too big of a stretch to imagine that home in this case is a metaphor for heart.

So moved by the encounter with Jesus, Zacchaeus’ heart turned from stealing to fulfill self-serving desires, to JOYFULLY giving away much of his wealth for the benefit of others.

Creating space for Jesus to come under his roof resulted in a deeper understanding for Zacchaeus that what he did, impacted those around him, and by that he was transformed.

Calvin says, “Zacchaeus is changed from a wolf not only into a sheep, but even a shepherd.”

Zacchaeus’ story is hope-filled. We learn we don’t have to live out of the restrictive “not enough” mindset that feeds selfish tendencies, and instead can move toward the spaciousness of living generously.

How would you respond, how do we respond to Jesus’ call to come into our hearts, into our homes?

Like Zacchaeus, every one of us has aspects of ourselves that can separate us from God or one another—

Like Zacchaeus, every one of us is being called into deeper relationship with Jesus that impacts all of our relationships.

As you know, we are in the midst of our “Living Generously” stewardship Campaign. I am grateful to you for all of the ways you support God’s work here at Holy Spirit. Your love of God and one another is inspiring.

For most of my life—I have been in the position where you are now, sitting in the pews listening to others reflect on the importance of financial stewardship.

Some of the best reflections I have heard have been from you—Roy’s perspective on “thin spaces” last week was fabulous. Al, Jason, Glenda, Mike over the past few years. You each reminded us of why you love Holy Spirit and why you sacrificially contribute your financial resources to God’s ongoing work here.

I have a confession to make. I have not always been a joyful giver. Yes, usually I have appreciated the opportunity to support non-profits and churches. My parents raised me to be grateful and to return to God a portion of the gifts God has given me.

But sometimes I gave purely out of a sense of obligation. Sometimes I resented that I couldn’t buy something I wanted for the kids or for me and was tempted to skimp from what I committed to the church. Sometimes I questioned how the money was being allocated.

It has only been in the past few years I have consistently experienced joy in sharing the many ways God has blessed Malcolm and me. It has only been in the past few years that I do not question fulfilling our pledge.

There are two reasons for this change—one I married a Baptist.

Malcolm believes at his core that you give back to God a significant percentage of the gifts you have been given. It is as simple as “Thank you” for him.

Even after his divorce when he was eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and sleeping on a blow up mattress, Malcolm contributed to his church. That generosity of spirit—it’s contagious.

The second reason my heart turned toward giving with gratitude and joy is YOU. The way you love one another, the way you love this church, the way you love this community.

I am in the UNIQUE position of seeing most of the ways your generosity is transforming lives; and that has turned my heart.

I wish you could all see that I see on a daily basis.

I wish you could see the way grieving families express how the love from this community and the ability to have pastoral support from clergy and lay people has helped breathe them back to life.

I wish you could see the gratitude and peace on the faces of those about to go into surgery knowing they have been anointed and prayed over, and that meals, rides to the doctor, and friendship will be awaiting them upon their return home.

I wish you could see the little kids in the neighborhood next door scrambling over one another to pick out a new book for summer reading; or see the toothy smile and hear the “thank you” for the warm lunch.

I wish you could be embraced as I have been by those leaving our parish hall after receiving free medical care for the first time in years.

I wish you could see the looks on your little ones faces as they raise their hands to receive the Bread, and run to grab our hands and reverence the altar at the end of the service.

I wish you could hear the laughter and see the tears of women gathered here in a circle sharing their, no bearing their stories.

I might be glad I can't hear and see what happens in the men's breakfast though...

I wish you could read the emails of the vestry as they encourage one another and wrestle with how best to manage the business of “church.”

I wish you could see the altar guild prayerfully prepare this space for worship.

Or sit with Tara as she conscientiously and compassionately responds to a multitude of varied calls and requests

Or sit in on planning meetings with Julia as she expresses her unbridled enthusiasm for setting a spark for Jesus on fire in your children's hearts.

Or listen to Peg encourage the choir and then hear them kid and buoy one other's spirits in practice

It has become easier for me to share the gifts God has given us because of all the wonderful ways you are making the world a better place here at HS.
and because

I witness the benefits of your contributions in the greater community around the diocese.

I wish you could see the relief on the faces of weary-worn families as they receive food and clothes and help after disasters like the tornadoes.

Or see how Camp McDowell transforms our children's lives

I wish you could hear the giggles and murmuring of teenagers laying on blankets at Camp McDowell, star gazing and pondering God's creation just hours after acting out the Biblical creation story

Or see Hank, the young man with Muscular Dystrophy read scripture at the closing Eucharist for Bethany's kids and the tears springing forth from his fellow campers.

Obviously I could go on and on. Each of you has varying levels of glimpses of these things, as your rector, I am honored to have a bird's eye view.

Every single day I see how Jesus is transforming us, calling forth new life from us. Being with you has turned my heart to truly know that it is in giving with joy that WE are transformed. Thank you I will forever carry you in my heart.

I know many of you contribute in incredibly sacrificial ways...the other day I met with one of our parishioners and she told me she perceives her tithe here as a car payment. she loves this church so much, she chooses to drive a much older car than she can afford, so that she can give a significant portion of her income to HS. She and her husband have already decided that when they retire, they will only have one car so they can continue to give generously

Here's the deal, there is no magic pot of gold that provides the opportunity to pray and play and work in this space...to provide paid staff to support this mission...It is all powered by us. What a wonderful thing God is doing here!

When we respond to Jesus' invitation to come into our hearts, the mundane becomes holy. Everything is an opportunity to deepen our relationship with God, one another, and ourselves. Sometimes it may seem as if what we are doing is so small in comparison to the many dark and challenging things in the world.

What we are doing, our way of being here matters. In a world that is high on cynicism and selfishness, we are a counterbalance of hope and love.

I am asking you to join the vestry and Malcolm and me to prayerfully consider how much you intend to contribute to carry on this good work and complete your giving card. Malcolm and I are so inspired by you, we have committed to contribute to Holy Spirit even after we have left.

As you prepare to call a new rector your tangible show of support will be a testament to how much you love Holy Spirit—how much you believe in what God is up to here.

“Hurry and come down;” Jesus is calling to you; is calling to me. “for I must stay at your house today.”

In closing, ask you to sing with me one of our favorite fraction anthems. A 37 Into my heart Into my heart come into my heart Lord Jesus. Come in today come into stay come into my heart Lord Jesus. Amen