

ZACCHAEUS GAVE AWAY HALF OF HIS POSSESSIONS: WHAT WILL YOU GIVE?

Luke 19:1-10

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson
Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA
30th Sunday in Ordinary Time, October 28, 2001

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Deadly bacteria are destroying American lives. I'm not talking about anthrax. I'm talking about spiritual bacteria that cause a soul-destroying disease which Tom Tewell calls *cirrhosis of the giver*. *Cirrhosis of the giver* transforms good Americans into something like killer sharks. Remember the movie *Jaws*, the horrible story of a diseased killer shark terrorizing a beach. In a desperate attempt to find out what had gone wrong with the shark, a marine biologist killed a shark and performed an autopsy. He found all sorts of things in the shark's belly; different kinds of fish, a kitchen blender, a Florida license plate, a piece of tire - all sorts of other things. Sharks aren't connoisseurs. They eat anything. Americans can become like sharks, consuming more and more, giving and sharing little. *Cirrhosis of the giver* turns good Americans into something like killer sharks.

Zacchaeus had *cirrhosis of the giver*. He'd consumed far more than he needed. But Jesus cured him. The cure for *cirrhosis of the giver* is a life-changing encounter with Jesus Christ. Where do we encounter Jesus today? We can encounter him right here at Oxford Presbyterian Church. Come to Wednesday's Word and see Elsie Ringler and John Thomson wrapped in toilet paper by 40 kids. Watch Lisa Guerrara, Karen Hopkins, Mary Drake and many others serving youngsters - and you'll encounter Jesus Christ at work at Oxford Presbyterian Church. Encounter the ministry of Jesus Christ at coral and bell choir practice. Or come to the church office and see Anne Terry put together the worship bulletin, type committee reports, counsel 5000 people every week and you'll encounter Jesus Christ. Watch Jim Sumner prepare for Wednesday's Word, counsel a parent or young person, spend a sleepless night at a lock-in, or negotiate a contract with Head Start and you'll encounter Jesus Christ.

Zacchaeus had a life-changing encounter with Jesus when Jesus told him to come down and serve him. "Stop being an observer! Get to work and serve me!" He got involved in serving Jesus and

Maureen
Beth Hobbs
Pete
Carp
Drew
Beth
Julie

was cured of *cirrhosis of the giver*. He pledge half his possessions to the ministry of Christ to the poor. ~~Zacchaeus had consumed so much stuff he could pledge to give half away and still have enough to~~ repay *fourfold* people he'd defrauded. Most of us could get along with half of what we possess. Many my age and younger enjoy twice as many material goods as our parents had. Parents of people my age were shaped and molded by two great events: the Great Depression and World War 2. Those two events made our parents' what sociologists call a *self-denying* generation. They denied self for the nation - think of how Ted Williams left baseball at the top of his career to serve in World War 2. They denied self for the community - World War 2 veterans sacrificed to rebuild post-war America, Japan and Germany. And they denied self for their families. They lavished on their baby-boomer children everything they were denied during the depression and war.

As a result, baby-boomers became *self-fulfillment* people. For many baby-boomers, life is not to be denied but fulfilled. Life is not to be denied for either family, career, country, or anything. We believe we have a right to happiness, an interesting job, a rewarding life, and an exciting marriage. We baby-boomers grew up thinking life was a cornucopia over-flowing with material possessions for us to enjoy. When you ask people like us, "What do you want in life?" we're apt to *think* "more". But when all we want is *more*, it's a sure sign we're suffering from *cirrhosis of the giver*.

We have an opportunity to show we don't have (or want to be healed of) *cirrhosis of the giver* when we make a financial pledge to the ministry of Jesus Christ through Oxford Presbyterian Church. I'm high on our church. Three years ago our average attendance was about 170 a week for both services. This year our average attendance is 220 and going up. We're moving! We're growing! We're ministering to more people! I wish we could do more! After our church burned in 1989 we made a conscious decision to rebuild in the center of town. We could have built a smaller, more ornate, church just for ourselves but that's not our tradition. We wanted to build a church in the center of town to minister in the name of Jesus Christ to the whole community. We wanted Girl Scouts and Brownies, Boy Scouts and Cub Scouts to call Oxford Presbyterian Church their home. We wanted a

place for the Well Baby Clinic to minister to needy mothers. We wanted to minister to youngsters through our pre-school and Sunday School. We wanted to serve the community as a polling place, a blood donor center - in short - a community center. We wanted our church to be a house of prayer for all people. On September 11, at a moments notice, the community filled our sanctuary to pray for our nation. Soon the Lighthouse Youth Ministry will hold its annual auction and dinner here. We offer our facilities to Second Presbyterian Church for dinners and other meetings. In a couple of weeks we'll throw our doors open to the community for a free gospel concert to raise money for relief efforts. I wish we could do more. We want this building to be a ministry of Jesus Christ. But it costs! It costs a \$100 a day just for utilities! It costs more to clean and maintained. Is it worth it? Yes!

Our church in 2001 has over a quarter-of-a-million dollar budget to minister in the name of Christ. That sounds like a lot of money, and it is. But we have 500 members many of whom have twice as much as our depression era parents who tithed from their meager incomes. If every one of our 500 members fulfilled our calling to be a disciple of Jesus Christ through our gifts, we would each give *only* \$540 a year, or about \$11 a week to meet this year's goals. But some of those 500 members are shut-ins and can't give. Some are in high school or college. Some have moved. And, I'm afraid, many are suffering from *cirrhosis of the giver*. Now if those of us who usually attend, about 220, took on the whole load of 270,000 plus dollars - we'd each give about \$1300 a year, or about \$25 a week - a do-able amount for most of us. Or think in terms of 110 pledging units and it comes out to \$50 a week per family. If every household had an income of \$25,000 and gave a tenth to the work of Christ through Oxford Presbyterian Church we'd surpass our goal for 2002 and expand our ministry.

I'm asking you to do three things as I close. First, respond to the call of Jesus Christ as Zacchaeus did. He wants to enter your home and heart and be part of your common life. Stop being a mere observer and get involved in serving Christ. Respond to his call and be healed of *cirrhosis of the giver*. Secondly, pledge money to the work of Jesus Christ through Oxford Presbyterian Church. Many are able to pledge a thousand, five thousand or ten thousand dollars. Some may be able to

pledge only a dollar week. Whatever the amount, take a step of faith and pledge to the general and building fund. Thirdly, when you pay your bills in any pay period I urge you to write out your *first* check to the ministry of Jesus Christ through Oxford Presbyterian Church as a way of saying God is *first* in your life.

Dr. Gil Peterson, former president of Lancaster Bible College - told a story about a church member who pledged to his church but for several years gave *twice* the amount. His pleased but curious pastor took him out to lunch and told him how thrilled he was at the generous giving, but wondered why his parishioner gave double what he pledged. The man explained, "Well, whatever the amount, I know it's not enough. I've known all my life that God loves me and has been extremely gracious to me. A few years back, it occurred to me that God was doing all the giving - the *real* giving. What I gave back to him was way short in proportion to what the Lord did for me."

"So?" asked the baffled pastor.

"No mystery," replied the man. "I'm just trying to catch up."

It's time for many of us to "catch up" in our giving - not that any of us could ever *really* catch up with God's generosity - not to bribe God, but as a way of saying thanks and expressing our love through obedience to him. Amen.