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Luke 19:1-10   
Redefining Gratitude

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Luke 19:1-10 Common English Bible

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through town. A man there named Zacchaeus, a ruler among tax collectors, was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but, being a short man, he couldn’t because of the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed up a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus, who was about to pass that way. When Jesus came to that spot, he looked up and said, “Zacchaeus, come down at once. I must stay in your home today.” So Zacchaeus came down at once, happy to welcome Jesus. Everyone who saw this grumbled, saying, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.” Zacchaeus stopped and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord, I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone, I repay them four times as much.” Jesus said to him, “Today, salvation has come to this household because he too is a son of Abraham. The Human One came to seek and save the lost.”

Last week I received a thank you note that made me want to cry. It was from my cousin who is getting married in November. I sent her a cake stand for a bridal shower that I was unable to attend. In her thank you note she told me that she had a smaller cake stand that was handmade by my mother-in-law. My mother-in-law made and painted ceramics for a living. My husband spent much of his childhood going to Country Peddler shows on the weekends. My mother-in-law passed away in 2011. My cousin said how fitting it was that we had given her a cake stand as well. It warmed my heart that she treasured a gift that was made by my mother-in-law, a cake stand that I had no idea about. I wanted to write her a thank you note for her thank you note!

We all know that gratitude is important. We teach our children the importance of saying “Thank you.” You might have memories of being made to write thank you notes. Gratitude is a gift, but sometimes gratitude can seem like it is something we do only because we expect something in return. I used to have a closet of things that I could give as presents in case someone brought me something. Anyone else have a gift closet? I was ready in case I would need to quickly reciprocate. Sometimes it can feel like we’re in this loop. We send a thank you note for a thank you note or give a gift because we received a gift. When does it end? That sounds like an innocent enough question but in Jesus’ day that idea was a powerful tool used to control others.

Under the Roman government Caesar was at the top of the pyramid. Everything existed because of Caesar. If all that you had was moldy bread, you had something to eat because of Caesar. Everything and everyone owed Caesar. Everything was from the top down and you were constantly in debt to everyone above you. Jesus was asked in Matthew 22 about paying taxes. Jesus said “Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God” (Matthew 22:21). To the Roman Empire, everything was Caesar’s, but the Jews believed everything was God’s. Jesus lifts up this conflict. Jesus said we were free from debt, we were free from holding others in debt, and we should be free from our anger against those who hold us in debt.

In Jesus’ day gratitude was build upon a myth of scarcity and imperial hierarchies.[[1]](#footnote-1) Gratitude got caught up in this structure of pyramids and it became a tool of payback and control. Jesus showed people that we live only in gratitude to God. Gratitude has to begin with a profound awareness of our abundance, and from that we are called to build communities of well-being and generosity.

In Luke 19 we have a story that illustrates the pyramid structure of Roman society. Zacchaeus had this job as a tax collector that put him in the middle of the social structure. There were nobles, senators, the military, merchants, artisans, tax collectors, freed slaves, and then slaves. In lands that they conquered, the Romans offered some political positions at auction to the locals.[[2]](#footnote-2) You could save your money and once a year you could bid and try to get a job. Zacchaeus probably bought his job. Zacchaeus was a Jew, not a Roman citizen, so buying a job was the only way that he could become wealthy. This is a story about the guy who cuts in line, cheats on tests, and stuffs the ballot box in order to become class president[[3]](#footnote-3). READ SCRIPTURE.

Zacchaeus is a climber; he knows how to survive in an unjust system. Jesus tells Zacchaeus to come down out of that pyramid, unjust structure that is holding people in slavery. Stop participating in a corrupt system of gratitude that oppresses people. Even the invitation to dinner has meaning. Only someone with a higher status could offer a dinner invitation to someone of lower status. Zacchaeus should be the one offering the invitation to dinner, but Jesus upends the pyramid. Then, once Jesus accepted Zacchaeus’ hospitality, Jesus would owe Zacchaeus his gratitude. A favor would have been extended to Jesus and Jesus would be obligated to repay that favor. Jesus offers the gift of his presence to someone who does not deserve it. Zacchaeus becomes the beneficiary of a gift, not the benefactor. Zacchaeus said yes to Jesus and he now owed Jesus something.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Out of his sense of gratitude he offered to give away half of his wealth to the poor and to pay back all those whom he defrauded four times as much as he skimmed. Zacchaeus had cheated every single person in Jericho, so it was impossible to give back that much money. Zacchaeus was promising to bankrupt himself when he got out of the tree of the Roman hierarchical structure of debt and duty. He stopped playing the game and salvation, which means healing and wholeness, came to him.

Come down, stop and sit. Jesus puts a table of hospitality where a pyramid was. All are guests and no one owes anything to anyone else. Jesus says gratitude isn’t something we do out of obligation or duty, gratitude is about relationship, it is about a response to a free, undeserved gift. Jesus gives us free gifts of grace and love and we are called to share them with everyone at the table. The oppressed and the oppressor sit at the table together and get to know one another. At Jesus’ table, all are guests and no one owes anything to anyone else. Everyone sits and everyone eats.

This past weekend I officiated at my nephew’s wedding. After the wedding, the family had all gathered for pictures and I was struck because even though my nephew’s parents were divorced, they wanted to take a picture together. My nephew’s mom turned to her ex-husband and said, I want there to be a picture with you and me and our son. That to me was grace, that was setting a table of love.

How we live together with gratitude makes all the difference in the world because living gratefully makes the world different. Gratitude is a noun and a verb, a feeling and a choice that takes a lifetime of practice.[[5]](#footnote-5) May we recognize that everything is a gift. Zacchaeus was given a choice: tree or table? Climbing to get ahead or reclining with friends? Zacchaeus chose Jesus’ way of table and the getting to know his neighbors.

I had a friend once tell me that after you have been stepped on enough times, you are too afraid to reach out to others in love and kindness. We live a life of fear. Gratitude can empower us. It makes joy and love possible. It rearranges the way we see and experience what is all around us. Gratitude makes all things new. It transforms how we understand what is broken and gives us the ability to act more joyfully and with hope[[6]](#footnote-6). May we give thanks. May we live in gratitude because there is a place at the table for you and me.

1. Bass, Diana Butler. Grateful. P. 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bass, Diana Butler. Grateful. P. 157. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bass, Diana Butler. Grateful. P. 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://foundry.podbean.com/e/summer-preaching-series-drop-the-mic-the-first-words-of-faith-give-thanks-preached-by-dr-diana-butler-bass/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bass, Diana Butler. Grateful. P. 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Bass, Diana Butler. Grateful. P. 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)