

The Transformative Power of Giving
A Reflection on Financial Stewardship
November 2nd and 3rd by Debra Bartelli and John Kaltner

We want to express our thanks to Fr. Val for the invitation to share some thoughts with you about financial stewardship. With the story of Zacchaeus we have a great gospel reading with which to reflect on that theme. But before we begin, we want to put you at ease and tell you that we're not recommending that you adopt the "Zacchaeus model" of giving and donate half your money to the church. We won't discourage you from doing that, but that's not our aim. I'll begin by offering some thoughts on the gospel passage, and then Deb will comment on its relevance in our lives.

Gospel stories are about transformation. People encounter Jesus and they are transformed physically, mentally, and spiritually. Through his miracles and teachings, people are changed and made different after meeting him. That's clearly what happens to Zacchaeus in this story. We learn much about him: his name, occupation (chief tax collector), social status (wealthy), and even something about his physical appearance with the reference to his being small of stature. But the other quality he possesses, the one that's the key to his transformation, is that Zacchaeus is curious. Two times the text tells us that he wants to "see" Jesus. He's curious enough that he climbs a tree to realize that goal. And because of that curiosity Zacchaeus gets much more than he bargained for. He has a conversation with Jesus that leads to a new identity for him as he moves from being a sinner to a saved descendant of Abraham.

But this is an unusual gospel story in that Jesus, too, undergoes a change and transformation. Did you notice what the first verse we heard says? It states that Jesus intended to pass through the town. A little later on it says that he was passing by. The Greek word that's used here is very clear about that – Jesus was going through Jericho, he wasn't going to it. And that's because this story is set in the middle of a long journey Luke has Jesus make to Jerusalem that we've been reading about this liturgical year. That road trip is found in chapters 9 through 19, and it runs like a spine right through the middle of Luke's gospel. Jesus is a man on a mission as he heads to Jerusalem, where he will be put to death, but here at Jericho he makes a detour, a pit-stop, as he says, "Zacchaeus, today I must stay at your house." Jesus changes in the course of the story and doesn't do what he intends to do.

Jesus' change in plans is what makes Zacchaeus' transformation possible, but it occurs mostly by virtue of the onlookers, the people of Jericho. When they hear that Jesus is staying with Zacchaeus, they call Zacchaeus a "sinner." This comes as a surprise to us, and it probably shocked Zacchaeus as well. Like us, he probably thought of himself as a short, rich chief tax collector. How did he become a sinner? The people's comment likely causes Zacchaeus to reflect on his life, and perhaps for the first time he sees himself as he never had before. He comes to the realization that he might not be what he thought he was, and so he makes the decision to give half his wealth to the poor. Without that unbelievable act of generosity, he would never have been able to make the transformation from sinner to saved.

But that's probably not the end of the transformation in this story. We're not told this explicitly, but the townspeople of Jericho had to be changed as well. We don't know what their reaction

was to Jesus's final words, but when he calls their "sinner" a "descendant of Abraham" that must have caused them to reevaluate their own lives and their tendency to label and judge others.

This is a remarkable story in which all the characters, including Jesus, are changed, and it all revolves around one rich person who decides to give away half of what he has. It's an illustration of what we might call the transformative power of giving. When we give, things change and nothing is the same. Deb will now offer some thoughts on how we've experienced this transformative power of giving in our own lives.

Last week when John and I were preparing our talk and discussing today's Gospel reading, one of the first thoughts that came to my mind was -- I wonder if Zacchaeus had a wife and kids. If so, it's too bad he didn't include them in his incredibly generous response -- because by making this decision to give on his own, he denied them that transformative experience that John just talked about.

That thought led me to reflect back about 25 years to when John and I had just started dating. Our first Christmas as a couple was approaching and I was becoming increasingly nervous as I tried to figure out what to get John for Christmas. One day around that time he told me he had an idea he wanted to share with me. And I can still remember my surprise and relief when he told me his idea. He suggested that we not give each other Christmas gifts and instead, pool our money and make a contribution to a local charity. I loved the idea -- and a tradition was born. In fact, to this day we've never given each other gifts at Christmas, Valentine's Day or on our anniversary -- birthdays, however, are another thing altogether. But the point is, through that decision about giving made 25 Christmases ago, our perspectives changed and so did our relationship -- our relationship to each other and to the needs of our community. Over the years, the decision to make giving -- to the church and to others in need -- a conscious, consistent act has opened the door to deeper conversations about our values and what matters most to each of us. And it has allowed us to experience together, on some small level, the joy and the power of contributing to change in our world.

So if giving has such transformative power, I wonder why the practice isn't more common in Catholic communities. Many of you have probably heard that Protestants tithe (that is they give 10% of their income to the church) and that very few Catholics do so. Well, I wondered if this was true so I did some research. And I learned that Catholics give less to charity than any other major religious group in the US. But I also learned that Christians in general only give about 2.3% of their income to charity and the church. That works out to be about \$20 per week for a family with an income of about \$45,000. And the sad news is that Catholics only average about half that amount.

Clearly, we're not all called to do as Zacchaeus and give away half of our possessions, but by the same token -- giving is not just something to be done by the very rich. I'm reminded of this every time I visit our sister parish in Layaye, Haiti. In that parish, Our Lady of Grace, during the Sunday offertory one of the acolytes stands in front of the congregation with a small wooden box -- and nearly every person present walks to the front of the church and places a donation in the box -- in many cases it's only a penny or two but I can assure you all contributions no matter how large or small are made of sacrifice. There's no such thing as disposable income in Layaye. On my most recent trip -- last month -- I watched that same scene unfold. One of the last people to come forward was an elderly woman. She walked slowly to the front of the church and I watched her place in the box as her offering one slim, white candle. In that parish almost everyone - even the poorest among them - finds a way to contribute. I often wonder why, in that desperately poor place, giving to the church is so fundamental. I don't know for sure, but I think it's because the members of our sister parish have a true sense of pride and ownership of their parish and with that ownership comes an acceptance of responsibility to the church and to each other.

I'd like to leave you with two images -- one of Zacchaeus giving joyfully from his wealth and the other of the elderly woman in Layaye giving faithfully even in her need. And I ask you to consider how their witness might transform us all.