

“Grateful: Table Communion”
Luke 19:1-10

Today we are focusing on how gratitude helps us to recognize our deep connections to others, to God, and to all of God’s creatures. But we will begin with how ingratitude, dissatisfaction, and conflict disconnect and isolate us. A few years ago, there was a news story about the Dead Sea. It is one of the great wonders of our earth, but it is facing a problem. It is going down about 3 feet each year through evaporation. When the issue was identified, a solution began to emerge, but anger and hostilities have gotten in the way. Here is a video from last June about this problem: <https://youtu.be/z6Tjwb9l0w>. How do we as human beings get so far away from our deep connection to one another, even when we know that our well-being is tied to the well-being of others? Life has a way of breaking us away from our true essence in God. We often live in a state of alienation and thus only focus on ourselves. Gratitude for this amazing miracle of life, the Dead Sea, can turn things around for a region that is so desperate for working together and knowing the connections that they have. Yet, hate and dissatisfaction have robbed the people of their ability to connect across the boundaries.

Our Gospel story for today shows us one of the ways the flow of gratitude is restored. I would say that this is one of the main ways Jesus restored the flow of blessings. And the response was overwhelming gratitude.

The story is about a man who inflicted a lot of pain on others and thus lived in a state of alienation from his community. Zacchaeus was a tax collector. Tax collectors were seen as collaborators with the Roman Empire and its occupation of the land and its people. They not only collected the tax which the Roman government required, but they also added to the bill to get themselves a piece of the pie. They were legal crooks. Zacchaeus was rich, and his wealth came as a result of exploiting others. His description as a short man might be seen as a metaphor for his diminished spirit.

Biblical scholar Verity Jones notes that, “To handle the vast sums, publicans like Zacchaeus formed associations something like modern corporations, each headed by a lead bidder and a few officers backed by many investors. Having bid to deliver to Rome a specified amount from a province, they worked with local officials, who collected within their own districts. Taxes on agriculture and import customs were subject to unpredictable fluctuations, so getting the numbers right was a tricky business. Publicans were also moneylenders, speculators, and contractors supplying material for the army. Such enterprises provided opportunities for cooking the books, commodities speculation, side deals, graft, and extortion to defraud Rome, local officials, fellow investors, and average citizens.” This gives us some perspective of why Zacchaeus did not have a good reputation in his community. He was someone who exploited others for his own material benefit. Zacchaeus had a powerful position in a very important town: Jericho. There were at least two major highways in Israel at that time and one of them went right through Jericho. Jericho was the customs station, and thousands of Jews came through there and they had to pay taxes on every cow, calf, and camel that came through customs. So, with his position as chief publican who had the contract for tax collection, Zacchaeus took

advantage of the Jews and exploited their religious celebrations to collect money. The story took place around Passover time which meant that tens of thousands of Jewish pilgrims were coming down from Galilee, going around Samaria because it was unsafe, and coming through the toll booth at Jericho and paying their taxes.

Jesus also was making this trip, from up north in Galilee, coming south through Jericho to Jerusalem.

Jesus had every reason to resent Zacchaeus and to continue to let him be alienated from others. But in the kingdom of God, all our expectations are reversed, and all are restored to their original connection to life. Jesus does the unthinkable by deciding to go to the house of this man to have a meal with him. The table communion Jesus shared with Zacchaeus was a radical act of generosity of spirit which allowed this man to respond with that same sense of generosity of spirit.

Not only did Jesus go to Zacchaeus' home, but he also told him that he was going to stay with him. The word "meno" in the New Testament Greek always shows how God dwells among us to transform our lives and our world. Jesus' visit to the home of Zacchaeus was not going to be a casual one. It was about the presence of God dwelling in Zacchaeus' home and heart. This dwelling presence radically changed Zacchaeus' life. He repented from his old ways of greed and gave away half of his possessions.

Gratitude always restores us to a larger sense of life. It moves us from feeling isolated to feeling connected to all of life. According to commentator Michael Card, "Zacchaeus is not misunderstood. He is not the victim of circumstance...He has chosen to work for the Romans, to bilk his own people. So successful is he at this job that he has risen in the ranks to become a chief tax collector. The people don't despise him because they are close-minded and judgmental; they despise him because he is a slimy, good-for-nothing thief. And he knows it." I love this description of Zacchaeus because it paints a powerful image of a man that seemed beyond the reach of God. He seemed so cut off from any goodness. But how does God restore him back to the flow of grace and gratitude? The grace of the table is so powerful that even someone like Zacchaeus is restored and redeemed not only to God but to his own community. No longer was Zacchaeus focusing on himself, but he also saw himself as part of a greater story of love.

Rev. Eric Law uses the old doxology with new words to help people think of the importance of giving and receiving as a cycle of blessings. The words for this doxology are these:

"Praise God from whom all blessings flow
Circling through the earth so all may grow
Vanquishing fear so that all may give
Widening grace so all may live."

To really connect this story to our own lives, we are going to invite you to share with your neighbors how you see these words of the doxology connect to the story of Zacchaeus

and also to our stories of generosity and gratitude...

The cycle of fear and ingratitude in Zacchaeus' life and the life of his community was broken through Christ's Table Communion. Sometimes we are so blocked from gratitude and life, that only an act of radical welcome and generosity can have the power to restore us. That is what we pray for every time we come to the table of Christ. We pray that through our sharing together, we can once more see ourselves connected to the grace that flows in all of creation.

I would like to end with a video about the conversion story of a woman by the name of Sara Miles and how the table to Christ transformed her life and in turn she found new ways to do the same for others: <https://youtu.be/PEhZ43A73cY>. This was the beginning of her call to go out and do the same for others by using the same sanctuary during the week to share food with all in need in the community.

Here are some thoughts from Sara Miles's inspiring book *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion* about the power of the Eucharist or Communion:

"The entire contradictory package of Christianity was present in the Eucharist. A sign of unconditional acceptance and forgiveness, it was doled out and rationed to insiders; a sign of unity, it divided people; a sign of the most common and ordinary human reality, it was rarefied and theorized nearly to death. And yet that meal remained, through all the centuries, more powerful than any attempts to manage it. The feast showed us how to remember what had been dis-membered by human attempts to separate and divide, judge and cast out, select or punish. At that Table, sharing food, we were brought into the ongoing work of making creation whole." May this table restore us today to our original connection so that we may go out and share with others in the same spirit. Amen.