



The New England Church Pulpit

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THE STEWARDSHIP OF HOPE

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Luke 19.1-10

Jesus was passing through Jericho when he happened to meet a rich man named Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector in the area. Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus but because he was very short and the crowd was very large, he could not. So Zacchaeus ran ahead of the crowd and climbed a sycamore tree to see Jesus as he passed that way. When Jesus came to that place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So Zacchaeus hurried down and was happy to welcome Jesus. All who saw it began to grumble, saying, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus told Jesus, "I will give half of my possessions to the poor and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.

It's difficult to find the equivalent of a tax collector in our culture today and therefore difficult to imagine the import of this story. But perhaps Bernie Madoff comes closest to helping us get the picture. Here's the guy who became exceedingly rich by bilking people of their retirement money and their life's savings with a deceptive investment scheme that rendered many people penniless. Can't you just see him, in a modern-day version of this story, curious about this guy Jesus who might like him in spite of his evil deeds? Not wanting to be recognized by anyone, he crouches through a crowd of onlookers to find out if this guy is any hope for him. Jesus walks through the crowd wearing his Levi's and t-shirt that reads in great big letters "I Save...at First National Bank," skipping with the children, shaking hands with the good, the bad and the ugly until he happens to notice out of the corner of his eye the diminutive figure of Bernie, eager to see but not wanting to be seen. As much as he wants to know this great man, he tries to shoo him away so his attention won't draw attention from the crowd. But, too late. They spot him, and in an instant turn their attention away from the lover of all to the one hated by all, who took their money under pretenses of increasing it but absconded with it with little remorse and no way of paying any of it back. Their life savings gone in a heartbeat. They hiss and shout obscenities at him as he climbs higher so they can't reach him.

Then, as if it was an everyday occurrence, Jesus calmly says “Bernie, is that you? Why are you hiding in that tree? Come down because I want to go to your house for lunch. I’ve got all the fixin’s we need for brats and beer, so come home and put the grill on, man. I want to talk with you.”

Now the crowd is outraged, not just at Bernie but more so at Jesus. They’re angry as hell that this one who cheated them out of their hard-earned money gets the attention of this holy man, and not only that, he gets to have this guy in his own home. “Hey Jesus, why didn’t you want to come to my house? I’m the Mayor; I’m the honest banker who has lived modestly to be sure everyone’s investments were safe; I’m the priest who has tried to emulate you; I’m an architect who has a bigger house for you to come to.” Then they start swearing at Jesus, shaking their fist and pulling out their guns, showing of course, their permit to carry a concealed weapon. How can this be that of all the upstanding citizens of this town, he chooses this crook to have lunch with?

Zacchaeus has hope (though I can’t vouch for Bernie.) Zacchaeus is more than casually interested in reforming his old habits, of transforming his profession into something respectable, of restoring all he’s stolen and making restitution four-fold for his shenanigans. The crowd doesn’t know this but Jesus senses it. The thrill of the change gives Zacchaeus hope.

Hope. To wish for something with expectation of its fulfillment. To have confidence; to trust. To look forward to something with full expectation of its reality. A wish or desire accompanied by confident expectation of its fulfillment. Something that is a source of or reason for hope.

So Webster defines the enigmatic concept of hope, but it is this latter definition that best describes people of faith. We hope for things for which we can be part of its fulfillment. We hope that hungry people will have enough to eat, so we give to the food pantry to make it happen. We hope that this church will be here for a good long time because of its powerful influence on us, so we give to make it a reality. It’s more than just a dream; more than a wish.

We are called to be stewards of hope, people who are the very source of or the reason for hope. Not that we have any qualities that stand apart from others but that with God’s strength and holy inspiration, we become hopeful people and in so being, become the avenue of hope for those around us.

Hope is the implementation of what Bishop William Temple once identified as the central truth of the church: The church is [a] social organization on earth which exists for the benefit of those who are not its members. Other organizations do this as well but certainly the church, at its best, leads the way. We have the privilege of being stewards of hope. There is no proof of any return for our investment except we hope that it will be so and are willing to put our money where our hope is.

It is difficult to sacrifice money that we could use to buy things for ourselves and provide for our families only to give it to the nebulous ministry of the church, for we often see little of what this investment produces. But ask yourself what this community would be if there was no New England Church around? For nearly 155 years, this church has given hope to slaves seeking freedom; hope to Aurora by encouraging leaders within these walls who would organize and volunteer at a myriad social service agencies that have sheltered people from abuse, overcome drug habits, fed the hungry

and sheltered the homeless; a community of faith who nurtured honest lawyers, compassionate judges, caring police officers, dedicated firefighters, trained paramedics, and a host of others who have contributed to the well-being of people in this community. This is the place where they, when drained of energy or discouraged with what might seem to be a thankless job, have found hope in the community that encouraged them to keep going, reminding them of the holy purpose they serve. Of giving them hope amid seeming hopelessness.

The church reminds us that when we say a situation or a person is hopeless, we are slamming the door in the face of God and any possibility of reform. This is what the crowd around Zacchaeus did; their intense hatred shut out any hopeful possibility of change. But Jesus demonstrated in his response to Zacchaeus and would to Bernie Madoff, too, if he climbed the tree of contrition and restoration. There's hope for everyone. As followers of Jesus, we are stewards of this hope passed down to us.

Hope springs eternal. "It is always better to hope than despair," Goethe reminds us. This has been demonstrated by the saints of the past in this congregation. Were it not for the hope during the difficult times, we wouldn't have the privilege of sitting in this gloriously beautiful room, in this liberal, inclusive congregation, standing side by side with people in our community who are lobbying for human rights in all aspects of our society. What kept the saints of the past involved in the church, in giving the money they could have used to buy something more for themselves? The hope that it would have a transformative effect in the community and make a difference in peoples' lives.

Most of the important things in the world have been accomplished by people who have kept on trying when there seemed to be no hope at all. (Dale Carnegie). The Zacchaeus's of the world are the inspiration of our hope, for they do more than complain that they are too short on one end, or helpless to do anything to change things, or squashed by the crowd of a society that shuts them out, or overcome by shame and guilt for all their wrongdoing. They produce hope because they do something to bring it. Their hope is prophetic and by the very act of living as if their hopes were a reality, it comes to pass.

An old Greek proverb says: A society grows great when old men plant trees whose shade they know they shall never sit in. Such is our hope today. Are we willing to invest in this church that only our grandchildren or great-grandchildren will benefit from? Will we willingly give of the resources given to us to give hope to the Zacchaeus's of this world? Let's hope so. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann