

Our scripture lesson for today takes place in the city of Jericho. Jericho is one of the oldest cities there is; --in fact, some scholars believe it's the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world. Our Holy Land group went to Jericho; -and one of the things you visit in Jericho - is the archaeological site, - the tel - where you see a stone tower that's 11,000 years old. It dates back to about 9,000 B.C. (That's a pretty old structure. They sure don't make things like they used to.)

I don't know about you, but when I hear the word Jericho, the first thing I think of - is 'walls.' -Of that OT story of Joshua leading the people into the promised land: "Joshua fought the battle of Jericho, Jericho, Jericho; Joshua fought the battle of Jericho, and . . .the *walls came tumbling down.* --That story of how the Hebrew people marched around the city for seven days, and on the seventh day, they blew their trumpets, let out a shout, and God knocked down the city walls.

You know, -God has a way of knocking down walls. It seems that whenever something gets in the way of God's plans, -or blocks us off from God's redeeming power, God has a way of knocking down walls and getting through.

The passage right before the one we heard read today - is the story of the blind beggar. Jesus and his disciples are

walking down the road -- approaching Jericho. A large crowd has now gathered- and is walking with Jesus. They pass by a blind beggar sitting on the side of the road. The blind man hears the commotion, and starts shouting out to Jesus, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" But the crowd -doesn't want Jesus to be bothered --- and walls off the beggar --- telling him to be quiet!

But Jesus hears the man, and stops, --- and pushes through the wall of people - in order to heal the man. "Receive your sight," he tells him. "Your faith has made you well."

Next comes today's passage: Jesus and the crowd arrive in Jericho and begin to walk through the city. People start coming out of their houses and lining the streets, wanting to see Jesus pass by. We learn of a man named Zacchaeus, who has heard about Jesus, --and especially, wants to catch sight of him.

But there's one little problem: 'Zacchaeus was a { *wee little man* } -He was really short -----and he couldn't see over everyone's head. --Being someone who is vertically challenged myself, I relate to his plight of being stuck behind tall people trying to see.

But there's also another little problem.

It would have been common courtesy -within a crowd of people, for the taller people to step back, and let the

shorter ones move to the front. But this particular crowd had no interest in being kind to Zacchaeus. In fact, they weren't willing to offer the least bit of 'courtesy' to this man. -Just the opposite. They pushed in closer, --- tighter-together, walling him off, shutting him out from being able to see when Jesus passed by.

You see, Zacchaeus was a tax collector. -And not just any tax collector, --- the chief tax collector. And he was very rich. -Quite possibly the richest man in Jericho.

Tax collectors worked for the hated Roman occupying government, and the tax rate was exorbitant. And not only that -Rome allowed the tax collectors to charge extra -off the top ----and keep whatever they could make.

As chief tax collector, Zacchaeus would have overseen the whole corrupt taxing system, and been paid a commission by all the individual tax collectors.

You can see why the crowd has no interest in stepping aside to let this little rich guy, get closer to the front. They close in the wall even tighter. -'Why does he even want to see Jesus, anyway?'

Perhaps Zacchaeus had heard that Jesus has been known to befriend tax collectors, and he wants to get a look at what kind of Jewish rabbi would actually be kind

to tax collectors. But it must be more than just that. It must be something deeper. -For when he can't push his way through the crowd, he starts to run. Which was very odd. Grown men simply didn't run in that day. -And grown men who were powerful and wealthy and well-dressed, -- especially didn't run.

But he runs on ahead of the crowd, -- and then, he does something really outlandish! He starts climbing a great big tree. -Wearing his fancy robes and his fancy shoes. Have you ever tried climbing a tree -wearing a robe ----- and tried to keep your dignity?

(picture of sycamore tree from Jericho)

Which tells us how badly Zacchaeus must have wanted to see Jesus. Something deep inside him must have been compelling him.

The crowd stares up at him -"Look at Zacchaeus up there. What's he doing?"

When Jesus arrives and passes by on the road, he spots Zacchaeus up in the tree, and stops. The crowd is intrigued. What's Jesus going to say -or do --to this guy?

But everyone is shocked, -and none more than Zacchaeus- when Jesus says to him, "Zacchaeus, -hurry down from there. I must go to your house today."

"*Jesus is going to the house of a sinner!*" - the people start whispering to each other . . .

We don't know what made Jesus stop and invite himself to this tax collector's home.

What we do know is that Jesus could see what other people missed, --- and I'm guessing ---that at that moment --- he saw something in Zacchaeus that no one else saw. -- --Or that no one else had taken the time to see. He saw a man who was ready for a new life; he saw a heart that was ready to be transformed.

And, we don't know what words were said over lunch that day at Zacchaeus' home. We don't know what events transpired. But we do know the outcome. Jesus was able to knock down - the final wall, -the wall of Zacchaeus' heart. Zacchaeus is a changed man. -A completely changed man. He announces, "I'm going to give away half of all my possessions - for the poor. And whoever I have defrauded, I will pay back four times as much." "Today, salvation has come to this house," Jesus proclaims. "For I have come to seek out and save the lost."

Jesus is an equal opportunity redeemer. He comes to seek out and save a poor blind beggar. He comes to seek out and save a wealthy tax collector. He comes to seek out and save you and me.

And our encounter with Jesus, -when it is genuine, - does something to our heart.

The more we open our hearts to Jesus, the more our faith grows. And the more our faith grows, the more we are able to trust God in all things. And the more we are able to trust God in all things, the more generous we become.

Zacchaeus was so completely changed, that he decided to give away half of all his possessions. That's pretty generous, I would say. Are you ready to take that step? - -- To give away half of what you have?

Oh, but he was rich, we say. He was able to give a lot away. There's no way we could do that. I'm not so sure. I discovered this video clip --- of modern day Zacchaeus' --- a very ordinary couple --- who give away 60% of their income. 60%! It kind of blows you away.

We're going to watch the clip. It starts very abruptly - with them showing their unusual household furnishings:

{video clip}

<http://www.umc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=IwL4KnN1LtH&b=2022489&ct=8740143>

Amazing story. --Think of the difference we could make in the world, --think how many lives could be changed - if we could start moving toward that kind of generosity.

It may seem impossible --- but it's very close to the heart of our Methodist founder John Wesley. -Who practiced not only the theology of generosity, but the theology of enough. Living in England in the 1700's - he calculated - when he was young - that he needed 28 pounds a year to live on. His salary that year was 30 pounds, so he kept 28 and gave away 2. The next year, his salary doubled. He still lived on 28 pounds, and gave away 32. His income kept increasing, - to the point that it increased dramatically. By the end of his career, he earned 1,400 pounds. But he still lived on 28. -And gave all the rest away. By the end of his life, he was giving away over 90% of his income.

Which he used to start schools, establish health clinics for the poor, and even start what today we would call a micro-loan lending program for struggling merchants.

This is our Methodist heritage: a transformed heart, which leads to trusting God in all things, which lived out in simplicity leads to extreme generosity - which leads to transforming the world.

You know, in stewardship language, we talk about the goal of giving a tithe - of giving away 10% of our income -- which up until I heard stories like this --- seemed like a pretty challenging amount. All of the sudden, a tithe doesn't seem so big.

But how, we ask, do we start giving away more money - if we don't even have enough money to pay our bills?

Well, for most of us, we have to start out slowly. Unlike Zacchaeus, most of us don't get there overnight.

Listen to Matt and Keri's story. They're a young couple at a Methodist church in Ohio. They heard about the Biblical principle of tithing in church - of giving away 10% of their income, and it sounded like a good thing.

But when they did the math on what they were currently giving, they realized they were only giving away about 1%, --and yet, that seemed like all they could possibly handle.

They had their mortgage, their car payments, their student loans, and lots of other expenses. How could they give away any more? But they wanted to try, so they decided to increase -by a little bit - the amount they gave away each month. This meant they had to look carefully at their spending habits and make some changes.

They had to spend money more wisely and with less waste and impulse buying. They decided to wait on buying a new car, and they paid down and lowered their credit card debt - which freed up a lot money.

By the time they reached a tithe --5 years later --Keri described how tithing had broken the sense of panic, fear and desperation that had always been part of their financial decisions in the past. They gave more --- but

worried less. Plus, that first month they were able to give 10% away, they felt more joy than they'd ever felt.

So I invite you to take the Keri and Matt challenge. Do what they did and figure out the percentage of your income you're giving away. Then, embracing Wesley's theologies of enough and of generosity, let God get inside your heart, and start chipping away at any remaining walls of fear or panic, that you might reach 2%, 5%, 10%, 50%, 60%, ---- infinity and beyond, --- wherever God is leading you to make a difference . . . change lives and transform the world!