

Zacchaeus: A model spiritually motivated giving

BY CATHY CLEMENT



As the alumni president of my small Christian college, I worked with the vice president who was a part-time pastor. He told me of a parishioner who came to him for counseling but spent all his time bragging about his love affairs. When my friend finally asked the man, "How much money did you make last year?" the man blushed.

We have a funny relationship with money.

Speaking of how we feel about money – who has it, how they got it, what they do with it – I was inspired to view Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus as a model for stewardship and was surprised at the depth of the story.

As a child, I sang "Zacchaeus Was a Wee Little Man." That's as far as I took the story. Later in life as a fund-raiser I came to realize that the story has all the features of spiritually motivated philanthropy.

In development-speak, step one is prospect identification. What's the first thing we learn about Zacchaeus? "He wanted to see who Jesus was." He sought out Jesus. Before he knew anything, Zacchaeus was committed to finding out. We also know that he was rich. He had the capacity to be generous. He also had a guilty conscience.

Step two is cultivation – Jesus singles him out from the many in the crowd. "Zacchaeus, come down immediately." In spite of the fact that the people are critical of Jesus' paying attention to a rich sinner: "They muttered, He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner.'" (The Bible seems to use "air quotes.")

Step three – Jesus makes a proposal: "I must stay at your home today." The use of the word "must" implies divine imperative. Then Jesus meets Zacchaeus face-to-face, not in Jesus' "office" but on Zacchaeus's turf.

What is Zacchaeus's response (step four)? He welcomes Jesus gladly. And he takes action: Zacchaeus gives half of his assets to the poor and offers to pay four times the amount if he has cheated anyone – the most extreme repayment required under the law (Ex 22:1; 2 Sam 12:6).

Finally, there's the follow-up. As an individual, Zacchaeus receives a spiritual reward. "Today salvation has come to this house." The community observers learn that even a rich sinner is part of the family: "This man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." Both the individual and the community are blessed by spiritually motivated giving.

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For reflection...

- How could we encourage a person who expresses interest in exploring faith?
- How can we help people think of giving from a spiritual perspective?