

MAKING A DIFFERENCE ONE BY ONE

Luke 19:1-10

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We are going to follow up on this worship series, “Making a Difference” with a worship theme for November called “Grateful.” Our first Sunday in November, which corresponds with All-Saints day, we’ll focus on our gratitude for saints and mentors in our lives. You’ll have the opportunity to appear on camera talking about that person or those people who have been most influential in your life. We’ll put those clips together and show that video on Thanksgiving Sunday.

When we think of those people who have made a difference in our lives, it’s usually because of a personal encounter. Rarely do we remember the teacher who was a great lecturer, who said something one day in class that created an “aha” moment for us. No, what we remember is a teacher who said something to us, personally. That teacher who saw something in you that made you feel good about yourself. That teacher who wrote a comment on your paper that made you try harder or pursue a new avenue of thinking.

We remember the cruel things that people have said to us; sometimes we remember them forever. I was with someone this fall who is in his 80’s. He remembers a gym teacher saying to him, “You are one of the most awkward boys I have ever seen.” That remark was made 70 years ago, yet it is still remembered.

Yet, thanks be to God, we also remember the words of praise, the acts of kindness. We remember when people take the time to see us as individuals, and get to know us. We are especially aware when someone sees potential in us, perhaps a gift or talent we never would have recognized in ourselves.

The singer Josh Groban performed in Cleveland last weekend. One of my friends was at his concert and said that not only was his singing wonderful, but his banter between songs was engaging and personal. One of the stories he told was about his middle school years. He thought of himself as kind of a nerd with a high voice at the time when many other boys his age already had developed deeper voices. A music teacher had overheard him singing and could tell that he was extremely gifted. So one day, without any warning, this teacher asked Josh to sing in front of the whole school at an assembly. He did. He sang beautifully; he brought the house down really. Later that day one of the boys Josh had always noticed because of his deeper voice saw him in the hallway and said, "Dude, you sing like an angel." He's remembered those words to this day.

Many people saw Jesus only from a distance. They heard him speak when they were a part of a large crowd. They saw him heal someone, but just barely, because they could only sneak a peak through the other people in front of them. Still he had an impact, and he gained followers wherever he went.

People would try all kinds of crazy things to get Jesus' attention. Remember the friends who wanted their ill friend to be healed? Jesus was speaking in a house one day. These friends climbed up to the roof of that house, cut a hole in it, and lowered their sick friend, on his pallet, so that he appeared right in front of Jesus and received healing.

Zacchaeus doesn't necessarily want Jesus to notice him, but he sure wants to be in a position to see and hear Jesus well. Zacchaeus is a short man, so he climbs up a tree where he'll have a good view of Jesus when he passes through town. But Jesus doesn't pass through town. He stops right under the tree, looks up at Zacchaeus and says, "I'm staying at your place tonight."

Two things happen next. One, people in the crowd begin to grumble and complain. It's hard to overstate exactly how much tax collectors were hated by the mostly poor people who

would have made up Jesus' audience. In the Roman Empire, local residents were subjected to many taxes, and they were often issued randomly: poll taxes, road and bridge tolls, taxes on merchandise, property taxes. They were administered by tax collectors who could add extra fees that they would keep themselves. It was an unfair and oppressive system, and Zacchaeus was up to his eyeballs in it.

So here's Jesus, the Jesus we love because he cares for the poor and the needy, the Jesus who calls for justice, our Jesus is befriending a tax collector! What is he doing and why?

Luke tells us one thing about Zacchaeus, other than his occupation. Zacchaeus is eager to see Jesus. There is a spiritual hunger about Zacchaeus. He has taken the first step towards personal change, which is acknowledging that he isn't satisfied with his life the way it is.

I want to hold up Zacchaeus this morning as a spiritual mentor for us. I like him not only because he's short! I like him because he has a readiness for Jesus to transform his life. He has said to himself, "I don't want to spend the rest of my life thinking only about myself and what I can get for myself." I believe he is seeking what all of us are seeking...he wants his life to count for something, he believes there's something "more" than just material possessions, he wants his life to make a difference.

And the minute Jesus looks him in the eye and speaks personally to him, he changes his life and fulfills his purpose. Immediately, without any hesitation whatsoever, he says, "I'm giving half of what I have to the poor. And if I've cheated anyone, I'll pay them back fourfold." And just like that, his life begins to make a difference for good, in his own soul, and in the lives of his fellow community members.

Can one person make a difference? Friends, that's how the world works. One person speaks up and says, "I see the potential in you" and new talent is brought forth. One person speaks up and says, "I'm going to give sacrificially" and others are inspired to give, also.

This person, Anil Henry, says, “I’m going to see if I can resurrect a dying hospital in a rural, forsaken part of India,” and year by year, starfish by starfish, he does it, so that where there was once a broken-down clinic there is now a thriving medical complex.

One person offers to spend his free time building a deck on the back of the Buoy Youth Center...if you haven’t seen it yet, here’s what it looks like, after one summer:

One person in this church had an idea for a men’s retreat, another had an idea for a Thrift shop, another had an idea for a parish nurse.

And when people who believe in making a difference gather together in one place, what we are able to do grows exponentially. I have always loved this quote from the anthropologist Margaret Mead: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.”

Our Stephen Ministers make a difference by offering a listening ear to fellow members in times of life change and crisis.

Our youth advisors make a difference by offering the gift of adult friendship to students at vulnerable times in their lives, and by providing opportunities for fun and service.

When a family without a local church affiliation needed a funeral for a young man who died suddenly, they turned to this church. We offered them a place of non-judgmental welcome, making a difference when they needed compassion the most.

My husband and I believe in the ministry and mission of this church, and so we have completed our pledge card for 2016, promising to give this church our time, talent and treasure, knowing that two things will happen, just as in the life of Zacchaeus. One, when we give, it makes a difference in our lives. We feel more hopeful about living in a world where there is so much bad news. And we know that our gifts, combined with yours, will make a real difference in the community of God’s people, locally and globally. A family will have a home, through the ministry of Habitat for Humanity. People will be fed, through Community Resource Services,

Haven Center, and St. Paul's Community Church, our mission partners. Those who are lonely will be visited.

This church's budget is lean, we watch our finances carefully, and we are entirely dependent upon the giving from friends and members for our ministry and mission. Your giving supports a hard-working staff, and maintains this building which is a resource to our entire community.

If you have any questions about how to make a pledge, or any other way you can support this church, please know I would be happy to talk with you.

Please join us in prayerfully considering how you can make a difference.