

**First United Methodist Church
618 Eighth Street
Columbus, IN 7201**

**Rev. Howard E. Boles
October 20, 2019**

“The Generous Heart”
Text: Luke 19:1-10

A woman telephoned a friend and when her friend answered she could hear the stress in her voice. “How are you doing,” she asked sympathetically.

“Terrible,” replied the woman. “I’ve got a splitting headache, my back and legs are killing me. The house is a mess and I am losing my patience with my kids.”

The caller could tell this was an awful day so she said calmly, “Listen. Go lie down, I’ll be right over. I’ll cook some lunch for everyone, tidy up the house and then take the kids to the park so you can get some rest. By the way, how is Sam doing?”

“Sam?” asked the frustrated mother. “Who is Sam?”

Realizing what had happened, the caller said, “Oh my goodness, I’m so sorry. I must have dialed the wrong number.”

There was a long pause and then the stressed mother asked, “Are you still coming over?”

This story always reminds me of a true story that my friend and colleague Kim King has shared. I love to hear her tell it, but hope my memory will capture the important elements. Kim began receiving phone calls on her cell phone from an elderly man. When she informed him that he had the wrong number, he would continue to talk. She realized that he was lonely. Whenever she could, she would stay on the line and talk with him. After one of those calls, she finally asked him where he lived. He was in a nursing home not too far from where she lived. Kim asked if he would like a visit.

I don’t recall the details of his life, but I remember fondly, that Kim began to visit him and she started to call him and check on him. They became friends.

The sad part of both of these stories is that they highlight an important facet of our modern society. Despite the rise of social media and Facebook friends, loneliness is a prevalent part of our modern lives. One recent study indicated that 46% of Americans always or sometimes felt lonely. This was true across the age spectrum. No matter what the age, people feel lonely. They lack that person to call when they are having a bad day and need a helping hand. They don’t have someone who can say, “Let me come by and help you out” or “Let’s take a break and go see a movie or concert.”

And this loneliness can be quite deceiving. According to a survey from Psychology Today, 60% of those who are lonely are married. 54% of Americans say that no one knows them well. Scientists have concluded that loneliness suppresses our immune system making one more susceptible to illness and that loneliness can be as damaging to one's health as smoking or obesity.

I don't think this is the solution, although it may have a seed of promise within, but I was reminded while we were in France, how differently they do meals. I don't recall seeing anyone eating while they were walking. Meals were meant to be taken in community with others. And the meals were slow. As Americans, we sometimes felt the need to get up from the table and ask for the check. But more often than not what we saw were people sitting together, eating slowly, conversing with one another. Meals were not meant to be a solitary event, but something shared with others.

On one occasion Diane and I were having breakfast in a little café. The tables and chairs were arranged to encourage conversations. And while we ate a simple croissant and hot drink, somehow we struck up a conversation with the woman at the table next to us. I don't remember how it occurred, who initiated it, but soon, we were not a table of two, but a table of three, sharing our stories, getting to know one another. It just seemed natural. While I certainly miss the meals we had while in France, I think what I miss more was the sense of community that was a part of mealtimes.

This morning's gospel lesson addresses these topics in some unexpected ways. There is a story of loneliness and social isolation. The isolation is overcome through the power of a shared meal. And there is rejoicing at being restored to community.

It is best to begin with the context of this story. This is near the end of Jesus' ministry. He is on his way to Jerusalem and there is a lot of fear about what this might mean. Some of his friends have tried to dissuade him from making this journey, but he is insistent that he has to do this.

Along the route, he passes through the historic town of Jericho. As often happened when Jesus entered a town, people came out to welcome him. It was a parade atmosphere with people lining the streets on both sides.

Living in Jericho was a tax collector named Zacchaeus. From our youngest days in Sunday School and Vacation Bible School, we learned a very important detail about Zacchaeus. The song we were taught in childhood indicated that "Zacchaeus was a wee little man." He was short. But there is at least one other important detail we need to know. Zacchaeus was a tax collector.

What this means is that Zacchaeus was likely a loner. He might make friends among other tax collectors, but he was likely a very lonely individual. Imagine what meals might have been like for a tax collector. You either sit down to a big table all alone or you sit at a little table aware that there is no one there with whom to share a conversation. You might even hear the nearby families sitting down for meals. People chatting, laughing, having a good time. Who wants to

be friends with a tax collector? Who wants to share a meal with him? Day after day, he sits down to a table for one.

Zacchaeus was curious about this man Jesus and so he wanted to see him. Being short of stature, he couldn't see over the crowds that lined the streets. And given how people felt about tax collectors, no one was likely to move aside so he could step to the front. If nothing else, Zacchaeus was resourceful. He ran ahead in the direction Jesus was walking and climbed a tree and waited.

The commentaries I consulted indicated that was quite undignified for a man to do. A man of position would never run and definitely would not climb a tree. But it was the only solution. Zacchaeus sets aside social norms in order to see Jesus.

When Jesus comes to the place where Zacchaeus is waiting, Jesus looks into the tree directly at him. He tells him to come down from the tree for he must stay at his home. The journey is done for the day and Jesus emphasizes that he has to stay with Zacchaeus. This is less a request and more of a requirement. Zacchaeus will have company around his table tonight. He will not be alone.

And this seems to delight Zacchaeus. He doesn't pause to give excuses of why he can't host Jesus. Luke tells us that he was delighted to welcome Jesus (and by extension, the other disciples.) It is the people around them that begin to grumble about this. They question whether Jesus knew that this man was a tax collector, whether it was right to stay in the home of a sinner.

But this is but one more in a long line of stories in which Jesus reaches out to those who are excluded, on the fringes, socially isolated and invites them into community. And what a powerful thing that is. Jesus doesn't tell Zacchaeus that his sins are forgiven. He doesn't give him a lecture or tell him to change his ways. He just sees Zacchaeus and invites himself to dinner, breaking that social isolation and loneliness, and this made all the difference in the world!

Zacchaeus is so delighted by this opportunity that he begins to make changes without even being asked. He tells Jesus that half of his possessions he is going to give away to the poor. If he has cheated anyone, he will repay them with interest. What is it worth to be included? What is the value of belonging? What does it mean to be seen, valued, welcomed without judgment? Just ask Zacchaeus. He was a wealthy man who came to understand that relationships were more important than wealth, friendship is greater than finances.

Dennis Valstad was a lifelong bachelor who worked as a dry cleaner in Ripon, Wisconsin. He lived modestly and was active in his community. Dennis suffered a stroke last July and passed away at the age of 69. Those who knew him best remembered him for his kindness and the volunteer work within the community. It was shared that he had made a couple of New Year's resolutions for this year. The first was to live a life that was pleasing to God and the second was to find true friends---not to be lonely. Two hundred and seventy people were in attendance at his funeral and visitation. The number is significant because Dennis left one special request in his estate. Along with money to be donated to various charitable organizations which were

important to him, he asked that \$500,000 be set aside and divided among all those who attended his funeral. This means that everyone there will receive just over \$1800.

This story was picked up by many news organizations including the CBS Evening News. And it is a feel-good story. But there is also a part that makes me sad. The attorney in charge of the estate commented that Dennis was a lonely guy. He added, “He had a lot of friends, but I’m not sure how many really close, intimate friends he had.” Don’t get me wrong, what this man did was an incredibly kind gesture and will be remembered kindly by all those who were in attendance. But it also makes me sad that Dennis didn’t get to experience this delight himself. What if he had taken just a bit of that money and invited someone to have a cup of coffee at the local diner? What if he had reached out to someone else who was lonely and invited them to dinner? What he did will make a lot of people very happy and appreciative, but I find myself still empty wishing that he could have experienced this same delight as well.

I chose the title, “The Generous Heart” for this sermon wanting to focus on Zacchaeus’ reaction to Jesus’ act of kindness. It is a powerful aspect to this story, but one cannot overlook the even greater generosity which preceded it. Jesus looked out upon a crowd of people and knew there were needs there. Even in a crowded parade of people, there was loneliness. As was often the case in his ministry, he reached out to those who were lonely, isolated, overlooked. He invited them into loving community where they could be embraced and welcomed and loved.

When the statistics indicate that nearly 50% of all Americans experience loneliness on a regular basis, there is no doubt that we will encounter someone like Zacchaeus in our daily life. They are probably not hiding in a Sycamore tree, but right there in plain sight. They may be sitting alongside you right now. Wherever we may encounter them, Jesus gave us a blueprint for how to respond. He reached out in kindness and invited them into a community of love and care. And we can do the same. It is one of the most important tasks as a community of faith, to reach out to those around us and share God’s love and acceptance.