

Matt. 14:13 Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵ When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." ¹⁶ Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." ¹⁷ They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." ¹⁸ And he said, "Bring them here to me." ¹⁹ Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰ And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹ And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Luke 19:1 He entered Jericho and was passing through it. ² A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³ He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. ⁵ When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." ⁶ So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. ⁷ All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." ⁸ Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." ⁹ Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Take, Bless, Break, Give

Matthew 14:13-21

Luke 19:1-10

Five thousand men, and countless women and children, come to Jesus. It gets late, the disciples worry about what will happen when these thousands of people get hungry with no food of their own and not a McDonalds in sight, so they advise Jesus to send them away. Jesus says, "You feed them." They say, "We can't. We don't have enough." Jesus says, "Give me what you have." Then Jesus *takes* the bread, *blesses* it, *breaks* it, and *gives* it to his disciples. Here are those four Eucharistic verbs again: take, bless, break, give... and they, in turn, give it to the crowds. Everyone is fed with more left over than there was originally. Jesus gives to the disciples and the disciples take what he gives them and then give to the crowds.

What does the bread represent in your life? What is it that Jesus has blessed and broken and given to you that he now expects you to give to the crowd? I posed that question to the men's prayer breakfast on Tuesday morning and their answers, added together, equaled everything. As I continued to ponder that question through the week, the story of Zacchaeus was presented to me.

It is so often condensed and simplified into a children's story, but it is as adult as any part of the Bible. I'm fascinated by the fact that when we turn this into a children's song, we focus on the height of Zacchaeus... a "wee little man," as though that is the reason he could not get close to Jesus. The reason he could not get close to Jesus is because he was hated by everyone, and he was hated by everyone not because of his lack of height but by his lack of morals. He was a "*chief* tax collector." Which means that he worked directly for Rome. He had a contract with Rome to pay to the emperor a certain amount of money. Rome didn't really care how much he took from people or how he took it, and they didn't really care how much he kept for himself, as long as he sent the required amount to Rome. Being a chief tax collector, he had men working under him who were responsible for collecting from a smaller region; their money was funneled to Zacchaeus, who kept his cut and sent the required amount along. So, when Luke says Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector, the fact that he was rich is a given.

But when word spreads that Jesus is coming into town, this man who gained his wealth by working for the enemy and cheating his fellow Jews, wanted to see him. We need to be careful about trying to read his mind, but this much is clear, Zacchaeus is so motivated to see Jesus that, when the crowds refuse to let him get in front so he could see – because they hated him for who he was and what he did – he climbed a tree.

When Jesus is coming through the city, of all the people he might see, his eye is drawn to the little man in the sycamore tree. Implicit in Luke's account is that Jesus takes in the entire story Luke has had to explain to us – who Zacchaeus is, what he is guilty of, why he is up in that tree, and, perhaps, why Zacchaeus wants so badly to see him. Jesus sees all of this and says, "Hurry down, for I must stay at your house."

Zacchaeus hurries down and, while the crowd grumbles, this chief tax collector says, "*Look, half of my possessions, Lord, will I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.*" This is remarkable! Jesus has done nothing more for him than recognize him and honor him by including him in Jesus' world. This is grace, no doubt about it. Jesus honors this dishonorable man, and something happens within Zacchaeus: he becomes the opposite of what he has been.

This little man who loved money more than he loved his own people; his own nation; becomes a little man with a big heart, a heart of gold, if you will, who, simply by Jesus' act of grace, vows to give half of his wealth to the poor and repay everyone he has cheated four times over. What is this change? One writer says, "Jesus awakened in [Zacchaeus] the consciousness of who he was in relation to God and in relation to his people. Jesus called him to be who he was created by God to be. And he responded with everything he had."¹

When you think back to the feeding of the five thousand, what does that bread represent that Jesus gives and expects us to give to others? Grace. When Jesus tells Zacchaeus that he must stay at his house, he is really bringing Zacchaeus into his house, his family, his kingdom. Regardless of the despicable way Zacchaeus has lived his life, Jesus sees him, loves him, and reaches out to him. And

¹ Michael Jenkins, president of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, in his blog, Thinking Out Loud, May 9, 2017. <http://www.lpts.edu/about/our-leadership/president/thinking-out-loud>

Jesus has done the same for each one of us, seeing us, loving us, reaching out to us with grace that covers anything and everything wrong about us.

And that changes us into people ready to receive, bless, be broken, and give to others what Jesus has given to us.

Twenty years ago a sports writer named Mitch Albom wrote a book not about sports but about a former professor who was dying of cancer. Mitch had begun to visit his teacher and friend, Morrie Schwarz, each week to help him, keep him from being lonely, offer support... and discovered he was learning more about living – and dying – than he had ever learned from Morrie in school. So he began to write about these visits and called the book, *Tuesdays with Morrie*. Albom remembers that people would come to visit Morrie in his last days to let him know they loved him, to encourage him, but he would begin to ask them how they were doing, and they would begin to talk about their lives and their problems and Morrie would listen to them. They would leave in tears saying they came to help him and he gave them more than they could give him.

Albom once asked him, “Why do you do that? They come to offer support to you.” Morrie answered, “Why would I not do that? Giving is living.”

At that point, Morrie Schwarz had little time left. If anyone could be forgiven for being a bit self-focused, it would be him. But, he had discovered the truth that giving is living. So, perhaps we living people ought to re-evaluate whether our lives are more about giving than taking. It made a difference in Mitch Albom’s life. After using the profits from his book to pay Morrie’s medical bills, Albom started 11 charities in Detroit and an orphanage in Haiti.

When we experience the grace of God in Jesus Christ, when we realize the gift he has given to us, it turns us into people who want then to turn and offer that bread of life to the people in our lives, especially those who are up in a tree, who are hated for how they’ve made such a mess of their lives, how they’ve hurt others. So that as we have received grace, we offer grace, and grace transforms others into bread givers, grace givers, as well. Why would we not? Giving is living.

You know, in the Book of Acts, there is only one time something Jesus said during his ministry is quoted. In the entire book, only one teaching of Jesus is quoted, and it is not quoted in any of the gospels. Does anyone know what that quote is? “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

May we take the grace Jesus offers us, bless God and others with good words and actions, allow ourselves to be broken so Christ’s light and shine through us, then turn and give what we have received to everyone we meet. For it is even more blessed to give than to receive. Giving is living.