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National Presbyterian Church

## Following Jesus: "Blessed to Give"

Luke 20:45-21:4

David A. Renwick

In our sermons through the winter we're looking at the ministry of Jesus through the eyes of one of the four accounts we have in the Bible – the account in the Gospel of Luke. And we come this morning to the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> chapters of Luke, which tell us about a couple of related incidents that happen in the last few days of his life.

**Just to set the scene, Jesus has entered Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday and there's quite a ruckus.**

Part of the ruckus is caused by Jesus. Jesus goes into the outer court of the temple (3 times the size of our 12-acre property) and turns over the tables of the people selling animals for sacrifice and changing secular money into the money used for financial offerings (they used what's called the "Tyrian Shekel"); as Jesus does this, he shouts out the words of the prophets Isaiah (56:7) and Jeremiah (7:11), saying "this is a house of prayer for all people but you have turned it into a den of thieves and robbers." And then, Jesus adds to the ruckus by telling stories (parables) aimed at his adversaries: pointing out the hypocrisy and murderous plans of the religious leaders who want to put him to death. Further, the religious leaders themselves add to the mix by attempting to trip Jesus up with *trick questions* that can get him into deep trouble – even *mortal* trouble, politically and religiously – if he gets the answer wrong by an inch.

Last Sunday, our focus was on the trick questions aimed at Jesus by his opponents, and on *how Jesus handled them* – using every ounce of his knowledge of Scripture, and every ounce of his social savvy, and every ounce of his intellectual ability . . . and I said, among other things last Sunday, that this intellectual back and forth that Jesus entered into has always been important to us as Presbyterians! Our Presbyterian "niche," if you like, within the broader church has often been seen as a calling not just to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul, but with our strength and MIND. And so, in the light of this passage and our heritage, I said that we needed to ask ourselves "When did I last use my mind, to grow in my faith intellectually for Jesus? . . . to be like Jesus?"

So, for Jesus' "use of the mind" is paramount in the first part of Luke 20.

But when we come to the stories at end of Luke 20, and the beginning of Luke 21 (our passages for today), we see that Jesus moves quickly back to matters related to loving God with heart and soul, and we find him,

- on the one hand, denouncing the superficial religiosity of the Scribes (intellectual religious professionals, consumed by the need to get)
- and on the other hand praising the sacrificial faith of a poverty-stricken woman (transformed by the need to give).

**Let's begin with some thoughts about the Scribes in Luke 20:45-47.**

<sup>45</sup>In the hearing of all the people Jesus said *to the disciples*,

<sup>46</sup>“Beware of the scribes,  
 • who like to walk around in long robes,  
 • and love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces,  
 • and to have the best seats in the synagogues  
 • and places of honor at banquets.  
 . . . <sup>47</sup>*They devour widows’ houses . . .*  
 • and for the sake of appearance say long prayers.  
 They will receive the greater condemnation.”

So what are the issues that Jesus points to here?

Well, one of them is clearly the need to be noticed and to receive the praise of others; to feel important or significant in the sight of others.

Nothing wrong with that – in and of itself. Indeed, it’s *a fundamental need that God has built into every one of us*, and if the need is *not met*, then all kinds of weird behaviors follow, including the behaviors of the Scribes.

- Whether thro’ the simple acts of showing off
- Or of vying for positions of prominence
- Or even abusing (often oblivious to) those who are weak like the widows that Jesus mentions in verse 47.

A couple of years ago, education professional, Marie Hartwell-Walker, wrote this:

The preschooler I observed in the grocery store yesterday was doing everything she could to get her mom’s attention. She whined. She squirmed in her seat in the cart. She took items off the shelf. She threw the bread on the floor.  
 Her mom asked her to please stop whining, replaced the pilfered items, picked up the bread and pleaded with her daughter *to please, please be good and she would get some candy when they left*.  
 As her mother turned around, her daughter gave her a kick.  
 Mom looked around and sighed. She grabbed a package of hamburger and made a dash for the checkout line.

So what’s going on (Marie Hartwell- Walker asks, barring medical and emotional issues, which may need medication)?

*Why would any child be so emotionally needy that she constantly makes bids for extra attention, even at the expense of adult disapproval and negative consequences?*  
 Dr. Hartwell-Walker continues: One of my teachers, Rudolf Dreikurs, used to say ***that children need attention like a plant needs sun and water. Mother Nature does her best to make sure both plants and our little ones get what they need. Little children are designed . . . to get adult attention.***

(8 Oct 2018, <https://psychcentral.com/lib/what-to-do-about-attention-seeking-kids/>)

And they will seek it, and so too will adults (this is not just a child’s problem) in all kinds of ways – some of which are simply obnoxious, and some of which are destructive: anything *to get the attention of some significant other to fill the well of emptiness* inside our souls.

Sometimes, of course, we luck out: we find it! The need is met in the attention of another – perhaps a parent, spouse, or friend -- *and our behaviors returns to normal!* But even then (I hate

to tell you), it won't last forever. The attention will one day come to an end, whether by failure or by death and leave us desolate again.

Unless of course . . . the attention we depend on more than any other is the attention of God – an attention, a noticing, that has no weakness or end; ever.

To paraphrase and add to Rudolf Dreikurs:

People need attention like a plant needs sun and water.  
And God *designed US to grow and thrive only when we seek*  
*And have a deep assurance that we have GOD'S full attention.*

Part of the thesis of Francis Schaeffer' book "Death in the City" (in the 1970's) was precisely this: *that everybody is looking for is an infinite lover who notices them and will never let them down.*

All our lovers who are less than eternal will inevitably let us down. They will stop paying attention to us at some point – whether by failure, weakness or death -- but the eternal God NEVER WILL!

I've often said that the greatest miracle in prayer occurs not just when we ask something of God – and it happens. BUT the greatest miracle is the simple fact that the God of the universe pays any attention to us at all! We are miniscule ants in the universe -- cosmic dust. Yet we have the audacity to claim that GOD NOTICES and HEARS US? Well, actually, YES!!!

But somehow, even religious people (like the scribes in our story) can miss this: the wonder of it all; the transforming power of it all.

- You can be highly religious like the Scribes and miss meeting and knowing God!
- You can go through all the motions of religion and be an intellectual expert in theology like the Scribes, and still find yourself (as singer Johnny Lee once put it) "*looking for love in all the wrong places*"

Until, that is, the Holy Spirit brings a conviction, knocks on the door of our hearts, and directs God's light to shine, not just into our head but into our heart . . . perhaps through some very ordinary means . . .

I have often shared the story of the time when poet, Mayou Angelou's heart was cracked open like this (and I'll keep on sharing it!)

She writes:

One day, when I was young and sophisticated, my voice teacher asked me to read from Lessons in Truth, a section which ended with these words, "God loves me." I read it and closed the book and my teacher said, "Read it again." I pointedly opened the book and sarcastically read, "God loves me." He said, "Read it again."  
*After about the seventh repetition, I began to sense that there might be truth in this statement, that there was a possibility that God really did love ME. Me! Maya Angelou. (DR: God, paying attention to ME!)*  
I suddenly began to cry at the grandness of it all.

(DR: and it was transformative)

I knew that if God loved me, then I could do wonderful things. I could try great things, learn anything, achieve anything – for what could stand against me and God. That knowledge

humbles me. That knowledge melts my bones, closes my ears, makes my teeth rock loosely in their gums. It also liberates me. I'm a spring leaf trembling in anticipation.

Alas, the Scribes didn't get it. So they did anything to grab attention to fill the well of emptiness, to feel good about themselves, even to the point, as Jesus says, of "devouring widows houses": breaking the repeated laws in the Bible about caring for the weak, and stepping on others whom they probably hardly even noticed.

**Whereas . . . on the other hand . . . Jesus, pointed out a poverty-stricken woman**, who surely "got it." A woman who even in her poverty had been transformed into a giver:

<sup>21:1</sup> Jesus looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; <sup>2</sup> he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins.

<sup>3</sup> He said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; <sup>4</sup> for all of them have contributed *out of their abundance*, but she *out of her poverty* has put in all she had to live on."

Now I realize that there is nothing said explicitly in our passage about motivation – about why this woman gave so sacrificially. But the immediate contrast with the Scribes, and a repeated theme in Luke's gospel point in the direction that I've been speaking about: *that Christian transformation flows in and out of the lives of people who have a profound sense that that they've been noticed – and loved – by God*. And this, surely, is true of this sacrificially generous woman.

We see this, for example at the beginning of Luke's Gospel with Mary the mother of Jesus. She's noticed by God and realizes that this is remarkable, indeed, almost absurd! And she breaks into song (what we call the Magnificat, in Luke 1), singing

"My soul magnifies the Lord, <sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
<sup>48</sup> for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

(DR: or, to paraphrase: "God has paid attention to me, notices me, his servant, even though I am so low that no one notices me")

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
<sup>49</sup> for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.  
<sup>51</sup> he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

(DR: God hasn't focused on the proud or the powerful or the famous, indeed)

<sup>52</sup> He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly . . .

"THAT'S ME!" she's singing! God noticed me? He loves me (It's a Maya Angelou moment)! – *and this knowledge transforms her: she gives her life, her body, her reputation, her whole future to God*.

Or think of another story, told only in Luke's Gospel about someone with a craving to be noticed, and whose life was changed by Jesus' attention. I'm thinking of Zacchaeus in Luke 19 – the rich tax collector whose life has been filled with getting, grabbing and hurting others. And while for most of his career, Zacchaeus might have been oblivious to the pain he caused, now he's come to a point in life where he realizes that there's an emptiness in his soul . . . a hunger

that needs to be filled. And perhaps Jesus can fill it . . . if only he can get Jesus' attention. IF JESUS WOULD ONLY NOTICE HIM!

So he humiliates himself by climbing a tree to see Jesus – to notice Jesus, and, miracle of miracles, Jesus returns the favor . . . and NOTICES HIM! PAYS ATTENTION TO HIM! SPENDS TIME WITH HIM.

And the transformation, the outflow of generosity and the passion to have relationships with others that are fair and normal is remarkable.

And Jesus summarizes this understanding when he teaches in Luke 12 that we are to

<sup>24</sup>Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds!

And

<sup>27</sup>Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even King Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.

<sup>28</sup>But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith!

And then, a few verses later, Jesus admonishes his followers to allow the knowledge of this love to transform them into givers:

<sup>33</sup>Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. <sup>34</sup>For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

God notices you, and is passionate about providing for you. Spiritually and physically. So let that inner knowledge transform you – he says . . .

So here's this insignificant woman, who knows that she is significant to God, spiritually wealthy, and this is a powerful knowledge that enables her in her financial poverty, to become a giver.

Howard Cameron was a Presbyterian missionary to Congo from 1954-1993. He returned in August 1997, and was at an event at the Limete Presbyterian Church in Kinshasa, that he describes like this:

On August 1, 1997, 423 women of this congregation gathered to commit themselves to prayer for God's blessing on Congolese refugees gathered in Kinshasa and to ask God's guidance in how they could meet the refugees' needs.

These women are amazing!

Their own needs are overwhelming – they have practically nothing.

- The average monthly salary of 1m zaires (less than \$10) doesn't allow for much of anything.
- The struggle to feed the family begins at dawn and continues until long after sunset. A change in the political situation could, in just hours, make them refugees in their own country. Yet they do what they can for those who have been run out of their homes, who have less than those who do not have enough.
- From a nearly bare cupboard, a woman brings one of the three cups she has for a family of five.

- Another brings the shawl she throws across her shoulders to ward off the early morning chill.
- Another woman brings a pot.
- Another brings some food.
- Another brings a small amount of money.

And another, and another – all of them bringing *a small something*.

*Four hundred and twenty three small somethings*. They divided nothing between themselves and came up with a big “something.”

They then took their “something,” and shared it with the refugees.

There were greetings, songs, prayers, and conversation. It’s called *ku-samba muntu* – which means to comfort and encourage someone who is suffering or grieving by surrounding that person with love and leaving something in their hands. These women enveloped the refugees with their love and shared with them their “something.”

***The church of Jesus Christ doesn’t shine any brighter than in this miracle.***

Conversations of Faith and Courage, 1998, p.1

And that’s the miracle that God longs to see in us too.

Knowing that we are noticed – that God pays attention to us, eternally, and being transformed by that blessing from being “getters” to “givers” – not just financially, but in every way

Remember this: we’re the kid in the cart in the grocery store. And we have the full attention of the one who matters most – our true, eternal and unfailing parent, God.

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**THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016

[www.NationalPres.org](http://www.NationalPres.org) 202.537.0800