

Week 3, Introduction and Overview **“When We Give Freely and Generously, Transformations Occur”**

Introduction:

Although Consecration Sunday is not until Week 4, I believe that the most crucial week in a stewardship series is actually the penultimate week. In our case, Week 3. Over the years I have noticed that, if there is good buy-in from the congregation, then most parishioners will have already completed their estimate of giving cards **before** they come to worship on Consecration Sunday. So, it is probably not going to matter much what I say in the proclamation that week. Most parishioners will have already decided on their estimate of giving for the next year. In some ways, this makes Consecration Sunday more of a celebration and wrap-up of the fall stewardship campaign.

From this perspective, the most important opportunity to encourage parishioners to seriously consider increasing their commitment comes the Sunday before the Consecration service, before parishioners have completed their estimates for next year.

This stewardship series centers on the theme of gratitude. We begin by reflecting with gratitude on all that God has given us, especially the gift of life itself. From there, we have reflected on how grateful we are for our church and all that it means to us.

On this third Sunday, the series does a split. On the one hand, we continue the focus on gratitude by having persons reflect on the persons in their lives who have meant the most to them. At the same time, the proclamation, worship resources, and Children’s Time will focus on challenging parishioners to think carefully about whether their estimate of giving card genuinely reflects their gratitude for their church, as well as their gratitude for all of God’s other gifts to them.

I believe that one of the biggest blunders made by the contemporary Church and its leaders is that we have allowed financial support of the church to be framed in terms of duty and obligation. People do not give freely and generously out of a sense of obligation. Just yourself how many people you know who give the IRS more money than their absolute minimum tax obligation? It’s human nature to only do the bare minimum, when we feel forced or obligated to do something.

People give freely and generously for two reasons:

1. they believe their donation will have a transformative effect on the recipients
2. themselves or their community, they believe making a gift will bring them great joy.

In this stewardship series, we focus Week 3 on the transformative effects of giving generously to the church. In Week 4, we will focus on the joy of generous giving, as we try to make Consecration Sunday a true celebration. I believe that transformational giving can lead to three distinct forms:

1. **Beneficiary transformation** occurs when generous giving transforms the life of the beneficiary. For instance, in one of the sermon illustrations for this week, a young student's life is transformed through a scholarship to attend a private, Jesuit high school. This scholarship allows the young man to become the first in his family to graduate from high school and attend college. The impact of this scholarship is so great that even his family experiences a transformation in their lives.
2. **Giver transformation** occurs when the person making the gift experiences a transformation. I believe that in our scripture this week, Zacchaeus experiences a personal transformation through his decision to give half his wealth to the poor.
3. **Indirect transformations** occur when someone is transformed by seeing the free and generous giving of someone else. Seeing the free and generous giving of someone else can transform our hearts, so that we see the world differently.

This is the type of transformation that we hope for in capital campaigns when we try to secure "lead gifts" before we even launch the campaign. The idea is that when people hear that a small group of persons have already committed major pledges, then they are more likely to follow their lead by making their own (usually smaller) pledge. It is financial leadership by doing.

Preparation:

I recommend continuing to include 1-2 persons in the worship service, who share how important their church is to them. You can have these volunteers speak live during the service or record them ahead of time and share the video during the service.

Include a bulletin insert for parishioners to write down the names of 2-3 persons whom they are especially grateful for. This insert could be a simple index card, or it could be a piece of construction paper cut out in the silhouette of a human.

Ideas for Social Media

I encourage the continued use of social media and your church website to promote the "Gratitude, Prayer, Re-commitment" series. You could continue to upload videos of persons sharing what they really like about their church.

For Facebook and other social media this week, I would suggest using the comments section to invite everyone visiting the church page to share the names of persons whom they are especially grateful for in their lives. I would leave this prompt fairly vague, so that respondents have a great deal of latitude in sharing names.

You might also consider promising to include the names of everyone shared through social media in a special blessing during worship service. If you take this option, be sure to recruit volunteers to go through the responses and record the names of persons listed on index cards to be used in decorating the Altar for Week 3.

Week 3 –Worship Resources

Suggestions for the Altar

For this week, I suggest beginning with a bare Altar, holding only the traditional two candles. If you followed my suggestions, then many parishioners will have brought photographs of people whom they especially appreciate. Some parishioners may have forgotten their pictures, but they can participate in the opening by writing the name(s) of special people in their lives on the index cards/construction paper inserts included in the bulletin for Week 3.

As the service begins, I envision the worship leader welcoming everyone and then inviting everyone to come forward with their photographs and/or index cards and placing them on the Altar table. To make this opening work smoothly, you will need to recruit 2-3 groups of volunteers well before the service. These volunteers will be responsible for the following tasks:

1. Depending on the size of your congregation, several volunteers who move about the Sanctuary to pick up photographs/cards from persons who are not able to walk their contributions up to the Altar. I am thinking of persons with mobility challenges or perhaps parents who have young children in the service with them. Note: you could assign this task to your ushers.
2. Several volunteers who stand at the Altar, helping to organize the photographs and cards as they are placed on the table. If people bring larger photos, I suggest having this group of volunteers place the photos upright on the Altar so that they may be seen, as opposed to simply laying the photos on top of the table. If your church has those wire photo stands, then I suggest using them in this service.
3. (Optional). If you have encouraged utilized your social media, such as Facebook, to post the names of persons for whom they are especially grateful and, if someone has transcribed those names onto index cards, then make several volunteers responsible for bringing those names forward to the Altar, as well.

I suggest using an Opening Prayer to lift up and give thanks for everyone whose photo or name has been placed on the Altar.

Opening Prayer

O Loving God, Today, we lift up those persons for whom we are especially grateful:

Parents and grandparents

Children and grandchildren

Aunts and uncles and cousins and others in our family

for friends and neighbors and colleagues

for teachers and coaches and mentors.

We give thanks for all of them and for the huge impact they have had on our lives. We are truly better persons because these loved ones have been part of our lives. We ask for your blessings upon each of them and upon us, as well. Help us to share how much they have meant in our lives. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Prayer

O Faithful God, we give thanks for the story of Zaccheus and the transformation that he experienced through Jesus. We long for a similar transformation in our lives. Open our hearts and minds. Then, send your Holy Spirit upon us to create free and generous hearts, so that we might be transformed.

We ask especially for the movement of the Holy Spirit within our hearts this week, as we prayerfully consider our estimate of giving for next year. Give us the courage and generosity to make a transformational estimate for next year, so that we may honor and glorify Christ in our deeds, as well as our words. In his name, we pray. Amen.

Offertory Prayer

O Gracious God, we lift up these financial offerings today, asking that your Holy Spirit may move within us, that we may experience the transformational power of giving freely and generously. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Children's Time

Objects:

1. The small piggy banks that you pre-ordered for this Children's Time. Again, we were able to order piggy banks with our logo for a very reasonable price at 4imprint. Their website is <https://www.4imprint.com/>.
2. A picture of John Wesley. (If you don't have a "proper" picture, then print one off the internet.

Outline:

1. "Today boys and girls, I want to talk about the importance of giving money to the church."
2. Show them the picture of John Wesley. "I have here a picture of John Wesley, who was an early Methodist. He lived a long time ago, in England.
3. "John Wesley had a saying that he frequently shared with other Methodists living around him. He said, 'Earn all you can. Save all you can. Give all you can.'"
4. "What do you suppose that he meant by that?" (Let the children think about this and encourage them to share their ideas.)
5. "All of your ideas are very good." Do you know what I think?
6. "I think that in order to understand what it means to *Earn all you can, Save all you can, Give all you can*, we need to start at the end and work back. So, what you think that he meant to **give all you can?** (Let them think about this.)

7. John Wesley was very concerned about all of the poor and sick people that lived around him. So, when he says give all you can, I think he meant to give all you can to help people who are suffering.
8. So, in order to give all you can, Wesley believed that everyone should “*Save all you can.*”
9. And, in order to save all you can, Wesley believed that everyone should “*Earn all you can.*”
10. So, today, I’ve brought something to give you. It’s a piggy bank for you to save all you can. Now, I think I have enough for everyone to have a piggy bank. What I’d like for you and your family to do, is to fill this piggy bank with all of your loose change. You might even see if there are some jobs you can do to earn some money for your piggy bank.
11. Now, when your piggy bank is almost full, I’d like for you to use the money that you have saved to help people who are suffering.
12. At this point, you might name a charity that your church helps. It could be something like the Heifer Project, a food bank, a scholarship for a kid to go to camp, a school backpack program, etc.

The Proclamation: “When We Give Freely and Generously, Transformations Occur”

Suggested Scripture and Sermon Title:

Luke 19:1-10

“The Transformation of Zaccheus”

Theme:

“When We Give Freely and Generously, Transformations Occur”

Scripture Analysis

To guide our reflections for Week 3, we will use the story of Zacchaeus the “chief tax collector” in the Gospel of Luke 19:1-10. To truly understand this passage of scripture, we must begin with a look at the social and political context of Jesus’ ministry.

At the time of Christ’s ministry, the people of Israel were conquered and oppressed by the Roman Empire and its legions of soldiers. From the Roman perspective, the land of Israel was just a backwater country to be taxed and exploited. And so, the Romans taxed everything. There were indirect sales taxes, tolls for roads and the use of various public goods, tariffs, customs fees, taxes, taxes, and more taxes.

Collecting all of these taxes required a great deal of time and energy, so the Romans came up with an ingenious scheme. They co-opted “entrepreneurs” from among the Jewish people themselves to collect all of the taxes. These Jewish entrepreneurs were called “chief tax collectors.” Each was given a region of the country and told how much revenue they needed to raise from the various tax schemes imposed by the occupying Roman Empire. The “chief tax collectors” then hired others to help them and they collected the taxes.

Now, the Romans never offered the “chief tax collectors” a salary or any form of payment for this service. Instead, it was just assumed that the “chief tax collectors” would lie and cheat their fellow Jewish countrymen and make a profit by over-charging on the taxes.

Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector for the area around the town of Jericho. Naturally, he was widely despised by everyone. Put yourself in the shoes—or, rather sandals—of someone living in Jericho. Here is a man who has betrayed his own people and his own country by openly collaborating with the occupying Romans. This man has probably cheated you on all the taxes that you owe.

And yet, even if he has cheated you, there is nothing—absolutely nothing—that you can do. If you refuse to pay the amount of taxes, then they will simply summon a nearby Roman soldier who will beat you to a pulp—or, worse they will make you watch while they beat up your daughter or your mother or your grandfather. And, finally, here is a man who is extremely wealthy, while you are struggling just to feed your family the bare minimum amount of food. Just like the people in Jericho, you would hate Zacchaeus, too.

Zacchaeus was very, very, very rich. We can assume that he lived in one of the largest houses in Jericho. He wore the finest clothes; he ate the best foods; and he drank the finest wines. All of his physical needs were met in abundance, and he still had more money to spend. But, Zacchaeus was not happy; his life was empty of meaning and joy. Despite all of his luxurious material possessions, despite all of the fine food and beautiful clothes, Zacchaeus was not happy; that is to say, Zacchaeus was not flourishing.

One day, Zacchaeus heard about a new teacher, a rabbi, whom people said could teach him how to have joy and live a life of meaning and fulfillment. Zacchaeus went out to see this wise, new rabbi as he passed through Jericho. Of course, the crowd around Jesus was so great that Zacchaeus could not get a glimpse of Jesus. And so, lifting up the hems of his rich, flowing robes, Zacchaeus ran ahead of the crowd and climbed up in a sycamore tree in order to see Jesus. Biblical scholars tell us that in Israel at this time, it was considered humiliating for a grown man to run and climb trees.

We can imagine how the crowd began to mock and poke fun at the hated Zacchaeus, as he ran down the street and climbed the tree. But, Zacchaeus humiliated himself because he just wanted to see Jesus; he just wanted to see this new rabbi who might be able to help him live a full and joyful life.

Zacchaeus humiliated himself, but then Jesus honored him. When Jesus got to that sycamore tree, he looked up and said: “Zacchaeus come down out that tree now because I am going to your house for dinner.” Jesus had lots of dinner options that evening. He would have been welcomed at any house in Jericho; people would have served him their best food. Out of all his options, Jesus chose Zacchaeus. In verse 7, Luke tells us that when the townspeople saw that Jesus had chosen to go home with Zacchaeus, they “...began to grumble and said, ‘He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.’”

The Bible doesn’t tell us what went on at the meal that night. We don’t know what Jesus said to Zacchaeus. But, we do know that at the end of the evening Zacchaeus promised to give half of his wealth to the poor and to repay fourfold anyone whom he had defrauded. And, we do know that Jesus said, “Today, salvation has come to this house.”

But, here’s the question: **Why did Zacchaeus promise to give away all that money when he was having dinner with Jesus?** Although we don’t know what was said that night, we can infer that Jesus encouraged Zacchaeus to dream about a new life, with new priorities and a new lifestyle. Rather than focusing so much on accumulating more and more wealth, I suspect that Jesus encouraged Zacchaeus to focus on something much bigger. Jesus challenged Zacchaeus to dream boldly; to dream about investing himself in Jesus’ dream for him.

When he decided to accept Jesus’ challenge that evening, Zacchaeus was transformed! In verse 8, Zacchaeus says, “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.” Through this generous gift to the poor and promising to repay anyone whom he has defrauded, Zacchaeus experiences a transformation that opens up to him a new life, filled with joy and fulfillment.

It is important to recognize that this transformation impacts three different groups of people. Obviously, as I suggested in the previous paragraph, Zaccheus experiences a profound transformation. There is a second group that experiences transformation: The poor who receive half of Zaccheus' possessions are better able to care for themselves and their families. Thus, they are transformed. Similarly, those victims of an unjust government that actively encourages cheating and fraud experience a vindication—and, therefore, a transformation—when Zacchaeus repays them. When Zacchaeus works for justice, the victims may experience a transformation.

Finally, I would also argue that possibly a third group experienced a transformation. This third group would be those in the community, if they were open to being transformed by Zaccheus' generosity and newfound commitment to justice. Perhaps some of those who laughed at Zaccheus as he climbed a tree or who grumbled when Jesus announced he was going home with Zacchaeus were transformed by Zacchaeus' decision to accept Jesus' challenge. Who knows? I do know that the most effective leaders lead by their actions, as well as their words. This is certainly true in our local churches. Our best leaders are those who lead by what they do, as well as what they say.

Potential Sermon Illustrations

The theme this week basically focuses on how free and generous giving can lead to transformation. Importantly, this transformation can occur in at least two directions. On the one hand, a generous gift can transform the life and prospects of the recipient. On the other hand, the life of the person giving can be transformed by giving the gift, as Zacchaeus most certainly was in our scripture. I have two potential illustrations to share with you:

1. I served a church in a small town in Kansas for several years. The church was located just three blocks from the high school track and football stadium. For years, the church had offered a programs called “Fifth Quarter” on the Friday evenings when there was a home football game down the street. The program was designed for Middle School kids. We wanted to give them a place to gather and something to do after games because, unlike the high school kids, they did not have a driver's license or close friends with licenses.

After the game, we would accompany the kids down the street to our church, where we would have pizzas and soft drinks. We also organized different games, with prizes that everyone eventually won. We also had a short devotional time, led by me or one of the pastors from the other churches in town.

One night, the pastor leading the devotional time asked for a volunteer to read the scripture. Several hands shot up and the pastor picked one of the kids sitting cross-legged on the gym floor. One of the adults handed him a Bible, but it became quickly clear that he was very unfamiliar with the book he was trying to read from. For starters, he couldn't find the passage based upon the book, chapter, and verses supplied by the pastor in charge of devotions that night.

When someone helped him find the passage, he stumbled badly through the passage and endured not a few snickers from the other kids.

After the visiting pastor finished his devotion and left, while the other kids resumed playing games, I went over and talked with the young boy because he seemed withdrawn and embarrassed. As we talked, I began to gain his confidence. Ultimately, he confessed to me that his family did not own a Bible. He went on to say that he had never read from the Bible before; never even held a Bible in his hands.

We talked a little longer. Then, he said he would like to find out more about what the Bible said. He asked if I knew how to get a Bible. I replied that our church would be glad to give him a Bible that night. One of the adult volunteers quickly fetched a new Bible from the church office. Before giving him the Bible, I inscribed it in the front cover. Then several of the adult volunteers and I prayed over him and the new Bible, asking that God bless him as he read and studied the Bible.

Normally, when we make a pledge to a fall stewardship campaign, we are thinking about the operating budget. We are thinking about paying our insurance premiums, paying for the utilities, paying pastor and staff salaries. However, the money to purchase that Bible came out of programmatic operating expenses.

I'm sure that the persons who submitted their estimate of giving cards the previous fall were thinking about all of those operating expenses. Yet, part of their offering that year went to buy a Bible to give to a kid who wanted to find out more about what the Bible said and received a Bible purchased out of those operating funds. Even the simplest, most mundane contributions to a church can be transformational in a way that we can never imagine.

2. Randall Hallett tells a story of something that happened when he served as the development officer for a Jesuit high school in the Midwest. After going through the mail one day, his Administrative Assistant came into his office, handed him an opened envelope, and said, "You need to look at this."

When he took the envelope, four \$5 bills fell out, along with a note. The note was from the mother of one of the school's graduates. In her note, the mother explained that her son had only been able to attend the expensive private school because of a very generous scholarship from the school.

The mother went on to explain that her son was the first one in his family to finish high school, and he had just recently graduated from college. The mother explained that the scholarship to attend this high school had been transformative, not only for her son but for everyone in their family.

After her son's graduation, it became important for the mother to make some small contribution back to the high school. Hopefully, her contribution could help someone else, like her son, get their education.

The note continued by explaining that the family lived on a very strict budget. So, for the past four months, at the beginning of the month, she had taken \$5 out of the grocery budget and set it aside in the envelope. Now, she was donating \$20 to the school.

When he tells this story, Randall Hallett concludes by saying that he put a \$20 bill in the envelope to be deposited and he had the original four \$5 bills framed for his office. Sometimes, when things are not going well, Mr. Hallett pauses to look at the four framed \$5 bills to put things back in perspective and to remember why he works as a development officer.

In this illustration, transformation occurred in a number of different ways. The young student was transformed by the scholarship that enabled him to graduate from high school and continue to college. His mother was transformed by the act of saving and giving the \$20. Finally, just as I suggested might have happened in the story of Zacchaeus, the development officer was transformed and empowered by the donation.