

## **“Grace and Gratitude”**

Ezekiel 37:1-14, Luke 19:1-10

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Children write beautiful letters to God. I have some examples. "Dear God, put another holiday between Christmas and Easter. There is nothing good in there now. Dear God, I bet it is very hard for you to love all of everybody in the whole world. There are only four in our family and I can never do it. God, if you give me a genie lamp like Alladin, I will give you anything except my money or bicycle."

This may not only be a child's innocent wish to God, but also could apply to adults, too. The desire to possess can be a part of our human nature. We naturally like "receiving" or "taking" rather than "giving" or "sharing," don't we? Do you think you are a "taker" or "giver"? Our Christian faith always challenges us to be followers of Christ. That means we experience God's great love and strive to be a "giver" not a "taker". Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection was a great reminder that Jesus is a "being for others", and it is exactly the nature of God. God is generous and gracious! Christians are people of faith and should reflect God in our world. When we come to church on Sunday, we want to experience God and practice what God wants us to do.

Today is the last Sunday of our Stewardship campaign, "Pledge Sunday." Pledging is an act of our giving to God. We give our small portion to God because we are thankful for His blessings. We set a 100% participation goal. We should be as generous as we can sharing and giving our talents and our money and our caring. The Stewardship campaign team generously fixed breakfast for us and Andrew, Michael, Megan, Rosanne and Samantha shared their musical talents with us. Thank you so much for your heart of generosity. Joy of giving is our theme for today. I hope that your giving is joyful and comes out of gratitude.

Our New Testament story is a great example of the joy of giving. Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector, desperately wanted Jesus to be a guest at his home. The very first thing he said was, "Lord, half my goods I give to the poor." His greedy, selfish, diseased heart had been transformed. This is the key point of his encounter with Jesus Christ. What really touched his heart and transformed him? And what were the consequences? I see three things in this story: the heart of love, the heart of compassion, the heart of generosity. After Zacchaeus encountered Jesus, he was changed from "taker" to "giver" because Zacchaeus

experienced Jesus' acceptance, he was transformed into a person of love, compassion and generosity. When we come to church, we want to experience God and encounter Zacchaeus's transformation. How is this possible? Through the Holy Spirit. Zacchaeus had a desperate need and eagerness to meet Jesus. We need the same hunger like his desire for the encounter. Then God will find us and meet us!

Our Old Testament reading shows us the prophet Ezekiel's vision for his lost nation and his people. When the Israelites were still in exile in Babylon, God showed him his vision and hope for Israel through Ezekiel's dream. In his dream, God took Ezekiel and set him down in the middle of an open plain. There were a lot of bones all over the place-dry bones, bleached by the sun. The dry bones themselves are described as "dead as dead." The prophet Ezekiel asked a question, "God, can these bones live?" God gave him an answer in verses 5-6, saying, "Watch this: I'm bringing the breath of life to you and you'll come to life. I'll attach sinews to you, put meat on your bones, cover you with skin, and breathe life into you. You'll come alive and you'll realize that I am GOD!"

When the Spirit of God comes to us, it brings us life. What matters here is the Spirit of God within our church. I hope that our church is a spirit-filled place like Ezekiel's vision. If there are any areas of dried bones in our church and ministry, we pray that God brings the breath of life and they'll come to life. I am pleased that there are many examples. We will offer Sunday morning Bible study for adult education. Our church campus and office are being updated and refreshed. Please look at our front parking lot landscaping work. There are 104 additional beautiful roses which were just planted last week and we have a new church sign. Our front parking lot was in pretty bad shape like the dead bones but now they look alive. The breath of life came to them! Our SWAG (Students Worshipping an Awesome God), youth group ministry, started last year and actively continues to grow this year. In addition, LMS, our Little Methodist School enrollment has increased and continues to be an excellent church outreach and preschool program. And there are now other new compassionate ministries such as the Women Support Group, Life's Challenges and Outreach Committee formed to serve and reach to out our neighbors. We are practicing the heart of love and compassion through these ministries. The breath of life and spirit of God are with us!

The purpose of a stewardship campaign is not only to support our budget, but also to practice our faith and reconnect to our source of life, Jesus Christ bringing the breath of Spirit to our church ministries. Let us continue to be sensitive and to renew our spirit, lead us in the right direction and reshape the future of our church. Then God will continue to make a way for our next step.

Let us move forward trusting in the Lord, our Jesus Christ. Amen.