

“Surprising Gifts”

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UCC at The Villages  
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2 Thessalonians 2:1-5,13-17 (MSG)

Luke 19:1-10(RSV)

*‘May Jesus himself and God our Father,  
who reached out in love and surprised you with gifts  
of unending help and confidence,  
put a fresh heart in you, invigorate your work, enliven your speech.’*

2 Thess. 2:16-17 (MSG)

Let us pray... O God,

May we be constantly renewed in our determination to be your people.

May we be joyfully surprised by the gifts we discover in ourselves, from you.

Amen

Stewardship Sunday is next week and that is a time for us to reflect on why we give to support the ministries of this church.

For example...

*It was stewardship time at the Hallelujah Congregational Church  
and the preacher was really getting the congregation worked up.*

*Nearing the end of his sermon he said,*

*“If this church is going to bring the Good News to a dying world  
it has got to walk the walk,”*

*To which someone in the back yelled,*

*"Amen! Let her walk, preacher! Let her walk!"*

*Then the preacher said,*

*“If this church is going to grow, it's got to get up and run!”*

*That same person called out,*

*"Let her run preacher! Let her run!"*

*Feeling the momentum surge among the congregation, the preacher said even louder,*

*"If this church is going to grow it's got to fly!"*

*Once again with ever greater zeal, someone yelled,*

*"Let her fly, preacher! Let her fly!"*

*Then the preacher seized the moment and shouted as if from a mountain-top,*

*"If this church is really going to fly, it's going to need money!"*

*To which someone in the back yelled,*

*"Let her walk a while, preacher! Let her walk!"*

<http://archive.stewardshipoflife.org/jokes.htm>

Like most churches, we have concerns about money

and especially like any church with a mortgage,

we have been very concerned about making payments

once the building fund money has been spent.

We have worked hard to respond to this important concern by holding focus groups to discuss not only finances, but our goals as a church.

In the meantime, we successfully renegotiated our loan, did fundraising, and

made calls for help from within the congregation to help lower this burden.

Willard, p.2

All these efforts have been very successful in turning that monthly obligation into a more manageable payment.

So, our next year's budget will include a line item for the mortgage – and that is in addition to the day to day upkeep of the building and grounds, wages for professional staff and the pastor, support for the various ministries of this church, as well as special giving towards missions beyond our church like OCWM – 'Our Church's Wider Mission'.

Soon, we will be celebrating our Tenth Anniversary – 10 years since we first gathered as a congregation of the United Church of Christ. That will be a great day when we look back to take account of what we have achieved, and look ahead to our next challenges.

We are greatly blessed to have been able to build our own building and to keep growing as a congregation in a time when many churches are struggling just to get by.

It means we are in a position to really do some good...

The Stewardship theme this year is "Surprising Gifts" – this is a reference to a phrase in the contemporary translation of 2 Thess. 2:16-17...

*'May Jesus himself and God our Father, who reached out in love and surprised you with gifts of unending help and confidence, put a fresh heart in you, invigorate your work, enliven your speech.'*  
2 Thess. 2:16-17 (MSG)

The Apostle Paul was speaking to those people who had gathered as Christ's followers in Thessalonica to keep them focused on their mission to be the Church in their time and at that place and not be discouraged by false rumors that Christ had come and gone.

He was reminding them they still had work to do and God would continue to equip them – and surprise them with gifts.

'Surprised... with gifts...'

Gifts of 'unending help and confidence' to provide 'a fresh heart', to 'invigorate' our work, and to 'enliven [our] speech'...

We have received gifts, 'surprising gifts' and that also means each one of you – and perhaps that may come to you as a surprise.

We talk about stewardship in terms of our monetary gifts – our 'treasure', but providing financial support for the church enables each of you to share your gifts of 'time' and 'talent' as well.

Each of you – each of us is a gift to be shared in our life together as we proclaim the Church's progressive voice here in The Villages-area.

Willard, p.3

In theater, it is said, ‘There are no small parts, only small actors’,  
and in today’s Gospel lesson we can see that no one is too small to play a role  
in the building up of the beloved community of God’s Kingdom.  
Zacchaeus was a short person, but he may also have been a very small-*minded* person.  
He was a tax-collector and certainly despised by his countrymen  
as a collaborator with their Roman overlords.  
But Zacchaeus was also the ‘chief’ of the tax collectors at Jericho,  
meaning he was well-paid for his collaboration while skimming off the top, too.  
So the reason he couldn’t see over the crowd may not only have been because  
he was not tall enough– but because the crowd intentionally blocked his view.

There must be more to this story about Zacchaeus –  
he was so anxious to see Jesus – but why?  
He later demonstrates a radical reversal from his un-professional behavior,  
by promising to make restitution – even four times as much, but why?  
What prompted this change of heart  
when so often those in a similar position take a blind eye  
to the economic plight of others?

Zacchaeus was like the tax collector in Jesus’ parable,  
who was remorseful, asking God for mercy.  
Yet there is something joyful and playful in Zacchaeus’ exuberance to see Jesus.  
He is not put off by the crowds’ indifference or bitter about their contempt,  
but he is so determined that he climbs a sycamore tree to get a better view.  
Sitting on a branch in a tree, Zacchaeus was waiting, and looking quite silly...

Jericho has been described as a significant military objective to be taken  
by armies on their way to capture Jerusalem.  
Jesus himself was nearing the end of his journey to Jerusalem and his destiny –  
a confrontation that would take his life  
by being arrested, condemned, tortured and crucified.  
Christianity is a religion of life and not death,  
yet Jesus is presented as a “sacrificial lamb” who was ‘born to die’.  
No matter how noble the cause or how great the conviction of being reborn,  
this realization must have weighed heavily upon Jesus  
in his grim determination to reach Jerusalem.  
He was not likely in a state of mind to be joyful or playful as he entered Jericho.  
But then he saw the sycamore tree...

Willard, p.4

Storyteller Tom Boomershine says that Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus 'represented his last chance to play' before the events leading to his crucifixion. I love the idea that Jesus could have been surprised with joy and react spontaneously to the situation, perhaps saying this:  
"Zacchaeus, hurry up and climb down,  
because I have got to hang out with you today!"

The story suggests that Zacchaeus was so thrilled by Jesus' generosity in spending time with him, he had a change of heart which changed his behavior. He would use his position and wealth to help build up that beloved community which is possible as a social reality.

Zacchaeus' attitude and actions are in sharp contrast with that of a character from another Gospel story. Jesus had challenged a rich young ruler – a civic leader of some kind, to sell all he had and give to the poor, but that fellow went sadly away because he could not part with his things. Zacchaeus, on the other hand, is almost giddy as he gives away half his fortune in a joyful response, and his excitement surprises and refreshes Jesus for the task ahead of him.

Serving God should be joyful – even fun,  
and not something where we are always counting the cost. We are a church that has been richly blessed and our burdens made manageable. We are not crippled by the fear of overwhelming debt, though it is something we must responsibly monitor and continue to address. As Stillspeaking contributor Matt Laney writes, God seeks for us to 'live an abundant life' and not simply a 'life of abundance'.

Your stewardship pledge enables our congregation to do what we do as a church through our various ministries to serve God locally and beyond. If I were to name individuals who make things happen here at UCC at The Villages, I would no doubt miss someone among so many of you who are devoted to "making church happen", week to week. But let me take a moment to name some of the things you all do around here:

Our Diaconate set up for communion today as they do every first Sunday of the month, and as they prepare every time we gather for worship, checking the candles, passing out bulletins, and organizing the liturgists, ushers and acolytes; They coordinate with me and the music director for our choir's needs, special music, Children of God sermons and skits. They help coordinate the Shepherds and Parish Nurse program.

Willard, p.5

Our Admin Team is responsible for the safety and readiness of our facility so that we have a comfortable environment when we gather for worship and other activities; and whose chairperson is the one who responds to alarms at 2:00 am; They coordinate for repairs when emergencies arise as well as regular cleaning and landscaping.

Our Christian Ed team is providing regular opportunities for Bible study, forums, and “life care” presentations, as well as projects done in cooperation with the Missions team and the Justice & Peace committee.

Missions has been active in coordinating donations for local and worldwide causes, whether that is for the Wildwood Food Pantry or One Great Hour of Sharing.

‘WHO’ is the Welcoming, Hospitality, and Outreach team that provides greeters at the door, manages the kitchen for coffee hour after church, and generally coordinates volunteers, as well as getting the word out about who we are and what we are doing as a church through local media.

The Fundraising committee has been doing a tremendous job keeping the ‘fun’ in fundraising with special meals, game nights, cruises, and the annual yard sale.

The Finance & Stewardship committee reviews the fiscal health of our church and communicates with our mission teams and committees about where we stand economically while preparing the budget.

Our office administrator and Office Angels help with communications, record keeping, the weekly bulletin and power point graphics.

Last – but not least, are each of you who show up and fill the pews on Sunday, go to Bible study, stay for coffee hour, volunteer to help with the Yard Sale, sing in the Choir, come to Men’s Fellowship Breakfast, go to Justice & Peace movies, deliver food donations, knit Prayer Shawls, pick up newspapers at Steeple Chase for recycling, serve as Shepherds, attend interfaith events like visits to Temple Shalom, and serve as officers and committee members for our church.

Thank you for being the gift that God sends –  
thank you for the help you bring in surprising ways.  
I am proud of our church and all of you.

Next week, Ed Johnson, Maureen McCoy, and I will go to the Bi-Annual Meeting of the Florida Conference as your representatives.

John Allen – the chair of our Finance & Stewardship committee, will already be there for meetings as the Conference Treasurer.

Willard, p.6

For many years now, our Conference has been struggling –  
and has had to make drastic cuts in personnel and programming.  
Many congregations are struggling as well, just to keep their doors open –  
Some have closed their doors and some have even withdrawn from the UCC.  
The issue is not just financial, some churches have not come to terms  
with what it means to be ONA – ‘open and affirming’,  
another reason to be proud of UCC at The Villages, another strength.  
For the sake of our sister churches as well as our mission  
to be a progressive voice in this community,  
we have got to succeed here at The Villages.  
Meeting our stewardship goals will enable us not only to walk and run,  
but to fly and even dance!

In the ways we have been successful by bringing debt – and fear of debt, under control,  
John Allen’s experience and advice has proven invaluable.  
As Treasurer and a member of the Board of Directors,  
John can help our Conference – let us pray that they would listen to him.

The Conference theme will be from Isaiah 43:19 (KJV), where God said:  
*“Behold, I will do a new thing...”*

For my part, I will present the scripture that day –  
and you know I am going to do some storytelling.  
I will demonstrate how liturgical arts can help us hear and tell  
the ancient words of the Bible in a new way  
that still speak truth to us for our time –  
especially for those who fear they have no future  
because of paralysis in their thinking...

[God said,]

*“Behold, I will do a new thing;  
now it shall spring forth;  
Shall ye not know it?  
I will even make a way  
in the wilderness  
and rivers in the desert.”*

We have demonstrated so far that we can walk, and even run.  
It’s time to fly!

Amen

*Today's lesson is 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5,13-17,  
which is attributed to the Apostle Paul  
and comes from the contemporary translation called The Message.*

*Affirming previous teachings about Christ's return  
while warning against deception, believers are reminded  
of blessings already received even as they wait  
for this promise to be fulfilled...*

2 1-3 Now, friends, read these next words carefully.

Slow down and don't go jumping to conclusions  
regarding the day when our Master, Jesus Christ,  
will come back and we assemble to welcome him.

Don't let anyone shake you up or get you excited over some breathless report  
or rumored letter from me that the day of the Master's arrival  
has come and gone.

Don't fall for any line like that.

3-5 Before that day comes, a couple of things have to happen.

First, the Apostasy.

Second, the debut of the Anarchist, a real dog of Satan.

He'll defy and then take over every so-called god or altar.

Having cleared away the opposition,

he'll then set himself up in God's Temple as "God Almighty."

Don't you remember me going over all this in detail when I was with you?

Are your memories that short?

13-14 Meanwhile, we've got our hands full continually thanking God for you,  
our good friends—so loved by God!

God picked you out as his from the very start.

Think of it: included in God's original plan of salvation

by the bond of faith in the living truth.

This is the life of the Spirit he invited you to through the Message

we delivered, in which you get in on the glory of our Master, Jesus Christ.

15-17 So, friends, take a firm stand, feet on the ground and head high.

Keep a tight grip on what you were taught,

whether in personal conversation or by our letter.

May Jesus himself and God our Father,

who reached out in love and surprised you with gifts

of unending help and confidence,

put a fresh heart in you, invigorate your work, enliven your speech.

Luke 19:1-10(RSV)

[1] He entered Jericho and was passing through.

[2] And there was a man named Zacchae'us;  
he was a chief tax collector, and rich.

[3] And he sought to see who Jesus was,

but could not, on account of the crowd, because he was small of stature.

[4] So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him,  
for he was to pass that way.

[5] And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him,

"Zacchae'us, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today."

[6] So he made haste and came down,  
and received him joyfully.

[7] And when they saw it they all murmured,

"He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner."

[8] And Zacchae'us stood and said to the Lord,

"Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor;  
and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold."

[9] And Jesus said to him,

"Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham.

[10] For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost."

Inspired by Luke 19:1-10

JESUS CAME TO JERICHO

ON HIS WAY TO JERUSALEM.

AND LOOK HERE!

A PERSON CALLED ZACCHAEUS

WAS CHIEF OF TAX COLLECTORS THERE;

AND HE WAS WEALTHY,

AND HE WAS DESPERATE

TO SEE JESUS WHO WAS STANDING NEARBY.

HOWEVER, HE WAS NOT ABLE TO DO THIS

BECAUSE OF THE CROWD, SINCE HE HAD BEEN A VERY SMALL –

THAT IS TO SAY, A VERY PETTY PERSON.

AND RUNNING AHEAD,

HE CLIMBED UP INTO A SYCAMORE TREE

IN ORDER TO SEE JESUS,

BECAUSE THIS GREAT PERSON WAS MOVING ON.

AND WHEN JESUS CAME TO THAT JUNCTURE,

HE LOOKED UP,

AND HE SPOKE TO THIS FELLOW,

“ZACCHAEUS, HURRY UP AND CLIMB DOWN!

TODAY, MAYBE?

BECAUSE I MUST STAY WITH YOU!”

SO, HE SPEEDILY GOT DOWN

AND JOYFULLY MET UP WITH JESUS.

YET, WHEN EVERYONE SAW THIS, ‘THEY’ COMPLAINED,

“NOW HE IS CONSORTING WITH SCUM!”

BUT HUMBLY, ZACCHAEUS SAID TO THE ONE WHO IS CALLED, ‘THE LORD’,

“DO YOU SEE ALL THIS?

HALF OF WHAT BELONGS TO ME, LORD,

I WILL GIVE TO THE HOMELESS!

AND ANY PENALTY THAT I EXTORTED,

I WILL PAY BACK FOUR TIMES AS MUCH!”

TO HIM, JESUS SAID,

“TODAY, HEALING HAS COME TO THIS HOME,

AS IT SHOULD BE FOR A DESCENDANT OF ABRAHAM!

BECAUSE OF THIS, THE SON OF MAN, THE TRUE HEIR OF HUMANITY

HAS COME TO SEEK OUT AND RESCUE

THOSE WHO ARE LOST.”