

Luke 3:7-14

December 16, 2018

## “Generosity”

He is a business man of the lowest order. Other people were created to fill his coffers with their money. He cares little about the plight of the poor or the suffering of children. He customarily spends the Christmas day alone bemoaning the loss of revenue because of the national holiday. This was the pitiful state of Ebenezer Scrooge until one Christmas when he was visited by four ghosts in Charles Dickens novel A Christmas Carol.

Dickens wrote the book from first-hand experience. His own father was arrested and imprisoned in 1824 for an outstanding debt. The family actually moved into prison with his father. At the age of 12 the budding author was forced to sell his collection of books, leave school and work in a factory. During this period the impoverished areas of London and the social injustices suffered by the working class were indelibly etched into his memory.

The secular redemption of Ebenezer Scrooge is one of the most well-known Christmas stories of English literature. What is not well known is Dickens' purpose for writing the book. He was not writing a religious novel. Dickens' was actually trying to steer his readers away from church-centered and austere religious traditions and toward a family-centered observance marked by the spirit of generosity. The novel was written also, as a prophetic warning to the rich and powerful in British society. Dickens believed that the affluent had become excessively absorbed with making money at the expense of the health, well-being and betterment of the everyday person. The book was also a denouncement of the lifeless holiday celebrations that had become English tradition.

While Dickens was trying to superimpose his secular vision on the holiday, I believe that a man such as John the Baptist in his own way

would have appreciated some of the Englishman's themes. The first would have been Dickens' emphasis on GENEROSITY.

John the Baptist tells the people who come out to hear his message that those who have two cloaks are to share one with those who have none. This was a very radical message. It goes way beyond weekly tithe. Just by using quick math and speculation, it still potentially comes out to 50% of these people's assets. When John says this, we would be doing John an injustice if we were to label this hyperbole. John was not exaggerating to make a point. He knew exactly what he was saying and he meant that every word be taken literally. If you think asking a person to give one of the few luxuries they have away is radical, remember this was the same John that wore a camel hair garment and lived off of locust and wild honey.

John's message was radical because he believed in the imminent coming of God's reign. He had been steeped in this message since he was a small child. Remember his parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth. They were very old when John was born. John's birth was considered a medical miracle. They undoubtedly died long before he began his ministry. We are told in Luke that John's parents lived in the hill country of Judea along the northwestern shore of the Dead Sea. That would have put them near the Qumran community and the Essenes. The Essenes are well known because of the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls in the desert caves. These scrolls are manuscripts of the Old Testament books that date 300 years before the time of Christ. They are the most ancient record of the Hebrew Bible that we have.

The Essenes were a religiously radical sect. Those who joined had to donate all their property to the community. Members who labored for wages were to contribute their earnings to the public fund. Food, clothing and all other necessary items were purchased from the public fund and were accessible by any in the community. Any Essene who was sick would be cared for as parents would care for their own

children. Unsurprisingly, under such conditions even those members who did not have children lived to a comfortable old age.

The generosity of the Essenes carried over into their practice of hospitality. Members of the community lived throughout Israel. Travel between communities was common and quite easy since they only had to take a weapon for protection. Once they arrived at another community they were welcomed and cared for and all would be provided to them. While John does not duplicate the teaching of the Essenes, his instructions regarding generosity certainly emulates the communities practice.

Generosity does not come naturally or easily even at Christmas time. There is a little bit of Scrooge hiding in each of us. Even the popular author Richard Dawkins understands this. He was once reported to have said “Let us try to teach generosity and altruism, because we are born selfish.” The spirit of charity has to be nurtured and exercised daily. This Christmas we would do well to take heed of John's words and consider how we can generously share with others.

While John was influenced by the Essenes' generosity, he took a different approach on vocation. John did not believe that everyone had to sequester themselves from society. John's advice to the tax collector would have stunned the Essenes. But John's words reveal that we are not marked by our vocation but by our CONDUCT. John shows that even the hated tax collector could conduct themselves in an ethical manner.

Tax collectors were despised by Jewish society for three reasons. First, they were considered an extension of a foreign power that occupied their land. Secondly, the work of a tax collector required them to be in physical contact with Gentiles on a regular basis. Which for a Jew, simply brushing the arm of a Gentile would make them unclean for several days and require that they offer a sacrifice. This may seem quite bigoted to us but it had a very valuable role in ancient Judaism.

After the nations of Israel and Judah were conquered the political and social elite were taken captive into exile and forced into slavery. Such purity laws reminded them that they were not to adopt the customs, values and morals of their conquerors. They were to maintain strict separation.

Tax collectors were also hated because they were notorious for amassing great wealth at the expense of their fellow citizens. The standard methods of collecting taxes allowed for this. Anything and everything was taxed—property, earnings, commerce, customs tolls, agriculture, sacrificial animals to name a few. This required a large corps of collectors. Rome would sell the franchising rights by auction. Those men who won the bid were then allowed to charge whatever sum of money they wanted. The fees did not have to be fair or equitable. They could charge a wealthy but defenseless widow more than a woman with 12 sons who would contest the fees. They could impose a 5% surcharge one year and a 20% the next. The assignment of taxes was entirely at their discretion. John tells them to collect no more than what is fair.

John's instruction to the tax collectors does not sound very impressive. He does not call them to embark on a grand crusade. He does not challenge them to initiate a massive overhaul of the tax code. He simply asks them to do what is right. This reminds me of the words one preacher wrote:

*Mother Teresa did not leap tall buildings, she did not turn nickels into dimes, she did not part the Ganges River. Small of stature and of no unusual physical or mental capability, she simply did what any of us is capable of doing - had we the will. Simple acts, applying just a little creativity.*

Conduct yourself in a manner that you know is right.

John's final instruction was to the soldiers. “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.” They were

probably not Roman but Jewish citizens perhaps assigned to guard the tax collectors. They may not have had the authority of a Roman garrison but they could still use their POWER to abuse their position. Soldiers were not paid very much. This would almost force them to plunder small towns and villages for food and personal profit.

We could easily skip over John's words to the soldiers and thereby miss a very important lesson. We may not carry swords or guns but our words can do an incredible amount of violence upon a person. The power of words is simply amazing. They can encourage and motivate or they can destroy a person's will.

A story that illustrates this very well is that of a college football team. The team had a very impressive record one season but something happened about midway through the year. The team was undefeated after its first five games but then lost its next seven. The coach was accused of berating and intimidating players. The team had lost the will to play for this coach. Mother Teresa did not win a Nobel Peace Prize by dominating and controlling others to fulfill her own needs. The award came from her service to others.

A Christmas Carol ends with Scrooge's new-found benevolence continuing as he raises Cratchit's salary and vows to assist his family, which includes Bob's crippled son, Tiny Tim. In the end Dickens reports that Scrooge became 'as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew'. We can all be like Scrooge in the beginning of the story, but we can also be like him at the end. Amen.

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