

## **“It is Hard to be Excited About the Future When We Are Burdened by the Past”**

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew's United  
for Sunday, October 30, 2016

Stewardship 5 Sunday – Giving Thanks: Modelling Gratitude

**Scripture Readings: Isaiah 1:10-19**

**Luke 19:1-10**

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

I am sure we all have faced this reality. Regretting something that happened in the past. It may have been something that we did or something that was done to us. It may be a planned activity or a spontaneous experience that resulted in unpredictable outcomes. Whatever it may be, we regret what took place.

It could be a missed opportunity, or a move or position accepted that did not work out. It may be turning down an experience that in hindsight would have been wonderful, or going somewhere that was nothing short of a disaster.

Whatever our experience, we all may have times when we regret what took place, and so we are stuck worried about the past.

When I lived in Manitouwadge, we had many people who took holidays with their furniture. A family move was planned and executed, and excitement built for the new opportunity. But after the move, many things about Manitouwadge clearly were missed – excellent schools, new hospital, good roads, outstanding winter maintenance program, sense of a close-knit community.

As a result, some of those families returned three to six months later. Long enough to be away, but it hardly seemed that they left – we said they were “on holidays with their furniture.”

Zacchaeus seems to be a person with some regrets. Now he did not do anything illegal as far as we know, and immoral is in the eye of the beholder. Oh, he did speak about repaying some people 4 times what he took from them, but we need to understand that tax collectors in that age were entitled to charge whatever they could get away with. They had an amount that was owed to the Roman authorities, but if people could (or would) pay three or four times that amount, tax collectors could charge whatever they decided was possible for the individual to pay, then keep the extra levy.

But it did not sit well with Zacchaeus. He had regrets about his actions. He was stuck thinking about what he had done, and felt the burden of his selfishness. He had to change his ways because life was no longer fulfilling and worthwhile as he lived it.

Zacchaeus learned a basic truth about regrets – they only have power over us if we live with them and then ignore them. Zacchaeus understood his regret about his actions was a nudge, a call, to tell him to start living in a different way. Regrets can be seen as a powerful force to weigh us down, or an invitation to examine our lives and plan a different pathway for the future.

Regrets have power over us if they immobilize us, but as one commentator suggested it may be a time to examine ways that we can learn to be better at adapting to reality around us.

Life does not have a permanence that can never be changed. In fact, there is a lot of impermanence in life – we need to learn that being adaptable is far more important than being stuck in old ways.

Part of that adaptability is realizing what we can control, and following through on it. Zacchaeus could not completely change the past, and most certainly could not change what people thought of him and his activities. What he could do, however, was change the ways that he treated people, and take control of living in a new way.

He could re-write the script that had been dominating his life.

That was up to him to do, and he was prepared to do it.

Martha Beck, in a column in the “O” magazine, suggests that regret can be managed if we take time to grieve what is irrevocably lost, and then go on to reclaim the essence of our lives.

Zacchaeus wanted to be a success, and he thought being a success was taking as much money from people as he could get away with in order to make himself rich. In the course of that lifestyle, he made money, but it did not make him happy. He actually was miserable. What was worse, people treated him as despicable and rejected him as a person.

Meeting Jesus put all of this into perspective, and he was forced to make a change in his life – to make an important decision as to how he wanted to live and act toward others.

Regret can take hold of us often because we doubt ourselves. And possibly the most important way to conquer regret is also offered by Martha Beck. She picks up a line from the stage production “A Chorus Line” that states: “I can’t regret what I did for love.” She wonders aloud: ‘Is that true?’ Martha reflects on life and realizes that throughout her life, she may make mistakes, even did things that were not ultimately helpful or successful, but if she acted based on love and concern for others, she never regretted what she did, even if it did not work out as planned.

Where she had regrets was when she acted out of fear, and not love. Then she may regret what took place, or the results from her actions.

Zacchaeus had been motivated not so much by fear but by greed, and when he changed the reason for being to being motivated by fairness and concern for others – another way to speak about love – he had a new view as to how he should live his life.

Fear can be a daunting emotion, and when we let go of fear and act on the basis on understanding and concern for others, a whole new window of opportunity arises. It is hard to plan for the future when we regret what has happened in the past. Zacchaeus reminds us that we need not live with regret, or be overwhelmed by the past.

That is the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is good news indeed.