

“How is it with your soul?” Generosity

By Pastor Leah Rosso

Luke 19: 1-10

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In 1938, a young couple welcomed their son Yvon into the world in northwest Maine. As he grew, the boy loved to be outside, and at the age of 7, the family moved to Southern California where the young man liked being outdoors way more than he liked being in school. He became an avid rock climber as he grew, and at age 19 created better equipment than what he could find in the store. The rock climbing community, of course, especially at that time, was not very big. And pretty soon others wanted the equipment that Yvon had made. In 1963, he started Chouinard Equipment, a business that had started out of his trunk and began to grow as it was known for high quality rock climbing gear. And by 1973, he expanded to some kind of outdoor clothing and other equipment and began to call his company Patagonia. What was unique about Patagonia, however, other than the high quality and niche outdoor equipment that it sold, was Chouinard's commitment to the earth that was always first and foremost about profits. In the 80's when he visited cotton farms and saw the desolation of land that was being caused by chemicals, Chouinard made the decision to switch to organic cotton for both the land and the health of his employees that were getting sick, and he did so not over a decade, but in eighteen months. Once he began examining the business practices of those supplying him with products, he went to the next level and researched the business practices of the suppliers to his suppliers, making sure that the practices of the businesses that supplied his suppliers were ethical. And from the very beginning, even when it was still Chouinard Equipment, he began transparent business practices so that when he found out one of his factories was mucking up a river nearby, he told the public what was happening and then not only paid to clean it up, but also contributed to clean up water elsewhere. And because he began that way at the very beginning, he was able to continue in that same way— setting up a 1% club for businesses who wanted to give away 1% of their profits to help the earth; taking care of employees by paying for a nanny to travel with them when they needed to bring their kids on business trips; and in 2011 rolled out a Black Friday campaign titled, “Don't Buy This,” which encouraged consumers to consume less and to think about how our purchases take a toll on the earth. His decisions didn't always seem to make any sense as a businessman, but in keeping before him what was most important to him— to care for the earth that he loves— his business has also flourished.

It might seem funny to compare a man like Yvon Chouinard with John Wesley, who lived three hundred years before him, but the two actually have quite a bit in common. Wesley, too, was focused on what was important to him— namely being faithful to God— and in his 20's figured out what he needed for rent, food, clothing, and other

necessities, and then pledged to not increase what he spent on his daily living for the rest of his life. That didn't mean that he didn't make more money— Wesley made a very good living — but he proceeded to give it all away and to do so creatively. He created micro-lending programs to help people get on their feet, and specifically to help women; he planted community gardens and one of his first publications taught people how to make home remedies so they wouldn't have to spend a lot of money on doctors that were not very helpful in their day; he bought clothing and mattresses for prisoners at a time when the prison was a dirt ground room with horrid conditions. His motto for himself and for the early Methodist movement was earn all you can; then save all you can; and then give all you can. And at the end of his life, Wesley was proud to say that he had less than \$1 in his bank account because he had given it all away. In his words, he had not even wasted a dollar.

I'm fairly positive that Yvon Chouinard has kept more than \$1 for himself, his wife, and his children. But in 2022, Chouinard put his company, estimated to be worth \$3 billion, into a trust fund so that all of the profits will continue to be donated directly to the earth. He has lived out his values his entire life. And if Wesley were here today, I think he'd probably point out that Chouinard wasn't a person of faith— so how much more do we, as people who know of God's love, have a responsibility to share all that we have?

Oftentimes when we ask ourselves, “How is it with my soul?” The tension we feel inside is the difference between what we say our values are and how we are actually living; where we are putting our time and resources; the legacy we want to leave in this world.

What I like both about the story of Chouinard and Wesley, is that they began as soon as they could. When I think of my own story of giving, I know we as a family would find it terribly difficult to give at the level we give today if we hadn't started a healthy practice of giving when we were younger. What's the phrase? — Start the way you want to continue. That doesn't mean if you haven't started it's too late. It just means that we all need to start somewhere that makes sense for us, or perhaps is a bit of a reach for us, and then to grow from there. Giving a percentage of our income trains our brains that we actually have enough — it helps us live into God's abundance rather than the message of scarcity we hear so often. When we prayerfully start with what we want to give, the rest of our saving and spending will follow.

The Gospel story of Zaccheaus speaks to the question of whether it's ever too late. Zaccheaus is very wealthy. Zaccheaus is a tax collector. Zaccheaus is either looked down on because he is short in stature, or, it could also be translated that he is looked down on because of his status. People don't like him. He is an outcast. And yet when Jesus comes to town, Zaccheaus runs out to greet him; climbs a tree to meet him;

and Jesus looks up and sees him— truly sees him— and from being seen and accepted and welcomed, Zaccheaus decides to put his money where his values are. Here is a man who accepts him. So Zaccheaus tells Jesus he will give away half of what he has and will pay anyone back 4x more than he owes them if he has cheated them. He doesn't offer this in order for Jesus to accept him; he responds to Jesus' love and inclusion of him, by responding generously with all that he has. If someone asked him in that moment, how is it with your soul Zacchaeus? It does not seem like he would have a difficult time answering as Jesus proclaims that healing has come to his house.

If we each examine our own soul today; the use of our money and resources; the ways we spend our time; whether we are, as Wesley put it, a slave to dress, friends, work, or habits; whether we can be trusted. What would we find?

Chouinard is not a man of faith that I know of— but he saw the hurting world around him and chose to respond; chooses still to this day to respond and to leave a legacy of healing instead of harm. Wesley saw a world of hurt around him and chose to respond. Some say that the early Methodist movement in the ways it lifted up the poor and stood with the oppressed is what kept England from a bloody revolution. Generosity can change the course of history.

What are we going to do here at Love First United Methodist Church?

How are we going to respond to the deep and abiding love of God that has been so generous with us? How will we leave a legacy of love? How will we be committed to the vulnerable— whether that be the poor; the oppressed; the very earth herself? How will we, like Zacchaeus, realize that Jesus has loved us from the very beginning and then respond abundantly to that love?