

CHAPTER TWO

A typical Sunday morning



From a participant's view

Kelly (40 year old), Sam (45 year old), Jonah (10 year old)

Rose (75 year old)

Rachel (24 year old)

As the 7:30 Sunday morning worship service lets out, Rose (age 78) takes a deep breath to fully appreciate the lovely aromas wafting from the kitchen. Last year, Rose would have made a bee-line for her car and headed to the grocery store. Now, the smells once again help her decide to stay and check what GIFT[®] has in store for her today. As she slowly limps across the atrium toward the food counter, Rose welcomes Rachel (age 24) who has just walked in the door. Rachel offers her arm, and the two ladies stroll over to the plates. Before attending GIFT[®], Rachel and Rose had never met, even though both had been attending this church for three years and forty years, respectively.

Rachel continues to update Rose on her graduate studies while the two women pick up the china plates and real silverware. Rachel stops her story long enough to allow Rose to compliment the chef, Sarah (age 67), and scoop steaming hot baked oatmeal onto her plate. As Rose adds a scoop of fresh fruit salad, Rachel continues with her story. Rachel then asks Rose about her latest visit with her grandchildren as they walk into the Chapel and find a place to sit. While Rose strikes up a conversation with the gentleman at the table about seeing his name in the newspaper, Rachel walks over to the counter in the Chapel and pours two cups of coffee. “Can't start the day without my coffee,” she jokes to another half-awake soul. “Yep, glad this is here so that I don't have to brew my own at home. I don't think I'd make it to church in time if I had to prepare my own breakfast!”

Most of the people at Rose and Rachel's table are finishing their breakfasts. The gentleman makes a second run to the coffee pot. The teenager at the table clears everyone's plate and puts them in the gray bus bin. He sees Jonah (age 10) run in the front door followed by his parents, Kelly (age 40) and Sam (age 45). Jonah runs up and hugs the teenager, then scurries back to grab a plate. “Formation time starts in ten minutes, better get our food,” insists Kelly. Last year, Jonah would rush in late to Sunday school class, if he came at all. This year, Jonah only missed one GIFT[®] so far: he had a fever and his mom wouldn't let him go to church.

As more and more people sit down to eat at the round tables set-up in the Chapel, the quiet grogginess of a winter morning is lifted with animated voices, with of course, the assistance of good food and fair-trade coffee. Some of the participants are so glad that the church is modeling good stewardship by buying a coffee brand that pays a living wage to the folks in Haiti growing it. Others are just glad to have a good cup of coffee.

It is now nine o'clock, and the facilitator, Samuel (age 12) stands up and tells people to please clear their plates and grab their last cup of coffee. Robert (age 72) loudly tells anyone who is willing to listen how much he enjoys the days when Samuel is “in charge”. The noise in the room gets louder as people clear dishes and quickly try to finish the stories they are telling. Samuel has learned how to

refocus the crowd and says forcefully, “The Lord be with you!” “And also with you!” replies the crowd, quickly settling down. “Let us pray. O Lord, send your Holy Spirit,” begins Samuel. He continues to read the prayer that was written by a parishioner. This same prayer is read at the beginning of every GIFT[®] formation time.

Samuel then hands out the song sheets for today's singing. He tells people which song is going to be sung first, and starts the accompanying music. Some people grumble through *Zacchaeus*, but most sing with gusto. Being in tune is not a requirement. Rose sings loudly to help the children learn this kid's song, but she is really singing it because she loves it. The teenagers in the room who are too cool to sing a kid's song any other time of the week are also singing with all their hearts, including hand motions. It's okay for them to, because they aren't singing for themselves, but for Joseph (age 4) whom they all think is adorable.

Samuel then reads the Gospel story for the day (from the Revised Common Lectionary). When he is done, he introduces Carol (age 49) who will lead the response time. As Samuel sits down to be a participant for awhile, Carol stands up and asks people to please push the tables against the walls and form a circle with their chairs. Once everyone is settled, Carol talks about how the Gospel reading can be seen from several different angles. The first one is a literal telling of the story. “Would someone please stand up and be a tree?” Jonah hops up and puts his arms in the air. “Now we need a crowd.” Several people (ages 7-79) stand up and gather around the tree. “Excellent. Who wants to be Zacchaeus?” One of the shorter women decides she might be well proportioned to be the wee little man. She pulls a chair up behind the tree and climbs up. Carol then asks for Jesus. The boy who normally loves to play Jesus is away on vacation this week, so there is a long silence as the people remaining in the chairs look at each other uncomfortably. Then Robert announces that he thinks Samuel should act out the Jesus role. Samuel looks very uncomfortable and squirms in his seat. Carol thanks Robert for the suggestion, with the gentle reminder that participation is voluntary and audience member is as important a part as the lead role. Samuel looks relieved. His older brother (age 17) is already in the circle as part of the crowd, but steps out front and says, “I'll do it, if no one else wants to.” Everyone cheers. The cast acts out the literal version of *Zacchaeus*, complete with climbing the tree, Jesus telling him to come down and eat with him, and Zacchaeus giving back everything and more.

Once the literal story has been acted out, Carol asks people to stay where they are, but act out how each of the characters may be feeling inside. The audience is a bit taken aback when the people playing the crowd get really angry and worked up. “Why is Jesus going with HIM? He stole money from me, and I give money to the poor every time I go to the temple!” “Jesus, don't go with him! He's a tax collector!!” “Jesus can't be all that great, if he consorts with the likes of Zacchaeus!”

Once Carol settles down the crowd (turned mob), she asks Zacchaeus how he feels and has him start to return money and talk directly to people in the crowd. The crowd becomes noticeably calmer, even their shoulders drop. They repeat the former exercise and now say what they are thinking. “Wow. I am baffled by Zacchaeus returning my money plus extra. What is this Jesus guy about?” “Phew! I won't lose my house after all!” “What is going on? I can't understand this.”

As the exercise is drawing to a close, Carol looks at her watch. It is 9:35. She asks people to all be seated and has the entire group process what they have just participated in. A few people talk about how well the scene was acted. Someone who was part of the crowd reflects on how surprised she was

to feel so angry. The woman who played Zacchaeus comments on how loved and forgiven she felt, even though it wasn't really Jesus, just someone acting like Jesus. Rachel picks up on that line immediately. "Wow, what a good analogy for how we are supposed to live our lives! We are all supposed to act like Jesus and have others feel loved and forgiven around us!"

At an appropriate break in the conversation (about 9:42am), Carol turns the leadership position back to Samuel who tells people to pick up their song sheets and turn them over to *Awesome God*. The teens all give a little cheer. This is one of their favorites, and they just sang it at a retreat last week. The room swells with joyful voices lifted up to the Lord. As the song comes to an end, Robert asks to sing it again. Samuel obliges and restarts the singing.

Once the second time through ends, Samuel again says, "Let us pray," and launches in to another prayer that was written by someone from the congregation. This prayer is said at the end of every GIFT® time, and leaves a space in the middle for people to add, in silence or out loud, their thanksgivings. "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord!" Everyone reply with feeling, "Thanks be to God!"

A few folks linger to put back chairs and tables to be ready for the Alcoholics Anonymous group who meets in the room tomorrow. Others rush out to get vested for the ten o'clock service. Most saunter out with friends and family, talking about Zacchaeus, physic tests, and aching backs.

Behind the scenes (from my view)

I have personal problems with delegation and volunteer recruitment. I feel uncomfortable asking people to volunteer their time and energy, especially when it is for a job I dislike doing. So I sometimes end up doing the work myself. I have learned, however, that GIFT® works best if I don't do any of the jobs. The more people who have ownership of the program, the stronger both GIFT® and the community become. And, with GIFT®, no piece of the program is unmanageable or a large commitment.

On this particular Sunday, I am more a participant than the "Director". I still am there early, with my son in tow, just in case. But even getting there early, the Chapel furniture has already been put in place, the coffee is starting to brew, and the smells from the oven...! The food provider brought all the food and stuck it in the oven and refrigerator before going in to the 7:30 service. The two set-up people are bustling about. The one who has done this several times before is setting up the mugs and coffee supplies in the Chapel. The person newer to set-up duties is following the directions in the GIFT® manual to set out the plates and utensils on the kitchen pass-through counter.

My son immediately starts putting out the juice glasses; that's his job. I try to figure out how to stay out of everyone's way. I'm not used to sitting around! Right before the early service lets out, the host for the day shows up. She goes behind the counter in the kitchen and asks my son if he would like any baked oatmeal today. He picks up a plate and she helps serve him. As the early service lets out, other people line up behind my son and make hungry and appreciative noises as they get their food. With nothing to do, I also get in line. My son goes and sits in his normal seat. I try to sit with people I haven't seen in awhile. I used to encourage people to eat with folks they don't know well, but now everyone does that on their own.

As I finish my food, I go to check on the kitchen. The host is serving the last few people. The two clean-up people are starting to gather dirty dishes and rinse them. The Hobart dishwasher is pre-heating. I look at my watch. It is 8:58, better go tell Samuel to get ready. But, of course, he has already given the last call and people are putting their dishes in the bus bins. One of the clean-up people comes in behind me and carries a full bin in to the kitchen. I sit down again. Everything is under control, no need for my presence! As I launch with gusto into *Zacchaeus*, I feel so proud of this group of people who are no longer passive receivers of Christian education, but are active participants in their own Christian formation.