

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 19:1-10

April 7, 2019

Fifth Sunday in Lent

The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

PAST SINNERS & FUTURE SAINTS

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

From 1961 – 1964, John S. Badeau served as President Kennedy's Ambassador to Cairo, Egypt. Ambassador Badeau did not come from a political background. When President Kennedy appointed him, he was the president of the Near East Foundation which organized relief services and provided technical services in more than dozen countries in Africa, Asia, and southeastern Europe. Before that, he taught religion and philosophy for eight years at the American University in Cairo, where he also served as Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences for ten years. Prior to his academic career, Ambassador Badeau worked as a missionary in the Dutch Reformed Church in Iraq for seven years. According to his obituary in August 1995, he later became a Presbyterian.

During his time in Cairo, Ambassador Badeau became friends with Egyptian President Nasser, which served him well when he was appointed ambassador. In his memoirs, the ambassador recounts the time he climbed a tree in the back garden of the ambassador's walled residence to fix some lights for an outdoor party. Word got out that the ambassador had climbed a tree. This caused such a commotion that President Nasser personally asked Ambassador Badeau in a private audience if the story were true. He couldn't believe a man of the ambassador's position and influence would climb a tree.

In his book, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*, Kenneth Bailey, who himself lived and taught in the Middle East for forty years, explains President Nasser's shock and amazement at Ambassador Badeau climbing a tree: "In the Middle East, powerful, prominent men *do not* climb trees, even in the privacy of their own walled gardens." Applying that cultural norm to today's story of Zacchaeus, Bailey writes, "Zacchaeus breaks with his culture both by running and by climbing a tree. He hopes desperately that neither act will be observed and carefully chooses a tree with thick foliage, some distance from town."¹

Last Sunday, we heard a story about a well-to-do, well-regarded, and loving father who risked embarrassment and broke with his culture by running because he wanted to greet his long-lost, given-up-for-dead son. Today we hear about a rich and much despised chief tax collector who risked embarrassment and broke with his culture, not only by running but also by climbing the sycamore tree, because he wanted "to see who Jesus was."

Despite the cute, bouncy little song about "Zacchaeus the wee little man" (which will probably play in your head for the rest of the day!), this story about Zacchaeus the chief tax collector addresses all sorts of serious issues, then and now.

Zacchaeus is another in a long line of characters on the fringe in the Gospel of Luke, an outcast by virtue of his profession. Not only was he a tax collector, he was a *chief* tax collector, who probably had people working for him to collect the hated Roman imperial tax. He was a Jew collaborating with the enemy. He apparently cheated his neighbors. And he had gotten rich off his community. Tax collectors were so despised that they are included in the category “tax collectors and sinners and prostitutes” in Luke’s gospel.

Here, very near the end of Jesus’ ten-chapter journey to Jerusalem, we meet the poster child of sinners. Chapters 15-19 of Luke’s gospel have been called “The Gospel of the Outcast.” Listen to the opening words of this section of the gospel, words which introduced last Sunday’s story about the father and his two sons: “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’” (Luke 15:1-2)

Listen to the cast of characters on the fringes of society in Luke 15-19:

- The lost sheep, the lost coin, and the two sons alienated from their father
- The rich man and Lazarus, the poor beggar who laid at his gate
- The ten lepers who were healed, including the only one, a Samaritan, who turned back to thank Jesus
- The persistent widow who wouldn’t leave the judge alone
- The self-righteous Pharisee and the humble tax collector
- The little children
- The blind beggar on the side of the road

Zacchaeus is the embodiment of all of the marginal characters in Luke’s story. We remember Zacchaeus because he was short (“a wee little man was he”), rich, and a chief tax collector. But Luke shares one more important characteristic – Zacchaeus was searching for something, so “he climbed up in a sycamore tree for the Lord he wanted to see.” In an interesting plot twist that bodes well for Zacchaeus, Jesus looked up and saw Zacchaeus. And, Jesus broke with his culture by inviting himself to dinner at Zacchaeus’ house, which certainly must have fanned the flames of the gossips and religious leaders in Jericho, who began to grumble, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” (Luke 19:7)

Of course, all of those folks in Jericho who saw it must have forgotten that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” This story about Zacchaeus sounds a lot like the parable Jesus told about the Pharisee and the tax collector to “some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt” (Luke 18:9-14): “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’”

In today’s story, Zacchaeus apparently has a change of heart. He stood there and said to the Lord, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I

have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.” You can almost see him beating his breast and saying, “Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner!” But Zacchaeus did more than just mouth the words “I’m sorry!” He did something concrete and tangible. He bore the good fruit expected of repentance.

In Oscar Wilde’s play, *A Woman of No Importance*, which made fun of English upper-class society, Lady Hunstanton and Lord Illingworth have a conversation in which Lady Hunstanton feels outclassed. However, she does point out that he always takes the side of the sinners, while she always takes the side of the saints. Lord Illingworth’s reply describes the mixed bag that is our human lives: “The only difference between the saint and the sinner is that every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future.”²

Guy Penrod, the former lead singer for the Gaither Vocal Band, sang about the same subject:

*In the pages of the Good book you can read
about liars, losers, cheats, and thieves
Who were changed, so there's hope for you and me.
It ain't that you fall but that you get back up.
Life's more about faith, than it is about luck.
Man makes a living by the work he does,
But he'll leave his mark cause of who he was.
My boots have walked that road, so son remember,
Every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future.³*

That gospel song could be sung about Zacchaeus. Certainly that day in Jericho, Zacchaeus the sinner had a different future stretching out before him, much different than the life he had to look forward to before Jesus invited himself to dinner at Zacchaeus’ house. And, although the gospel story doesn’t tell us anything at all about whether or not Zacchaeus followed through on his promise to Jesus, Christian tradition came to think of Zacchaeus as a saint with a past.

According to Christian tradition, shortly after Jesus ascended into heaven forty days after his resurrection, Zacchaeus began to accompany Peter on his travels to spread the gospel. Eventually, so the story goes, Zacchaeus was appointed Bishop of Caesarea in Palestine, where he died in peace.

Saturday, April 20, the day before Easter this year, is the Feast of St. Zacchaeus, according to the liturgical calendar of the Eastern Orthodox Church. But, on the same calendar, the Sunday of Zacchaeus was just less than two months ago, February 10, five Sundays before the beginning of Lent. The Sunday of Zacchaeus is the beginning of “pre-Lent” in the Orthodox Church, a month-long period of preparation for the Season of Lent. The story of Zacchaeus is read to begin the preparations, because his story represents the meaning of Lent. According to the website of the Orthodox Church in America, “[The story] tells how Christ brought salvation to the sinful man, and how his life was changed simply because ‘he sought to see who Jesus was.’ The desire and effort to see Jesus begins the entire movement through Lent towards Pascha [Easter]. It is the first movement of salvation.”

If you wonder how Zacchaeus' story has any meaning for your life and mine this Lenten season, think about this interpretation from the Orthodox Church: "Our Lenten journey begins with a recognition of our own sinfulness, just as Zacchaeus recognized his . . . The example of Zacchaeus teaches us that we should turn away from our sins, and atone for them. The real proof of our sorrow and repentance is not just a verbal apology, but when we correct ourselves and try to make amends for the consequences of our evil actions."⁴

Even though Zacchaeus' repentance is the focus of this story, I wonder if it isn't told for all of us – then and now – who so easily and often find ourselves thinking, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people" and grumbling and saying, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner!" If we're honest with ourselves and with God and – most difficult of all – with each other, we will say with the tax collector in the temple, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" Then, if our repentance is sincere, we will make it known, not just in what we say but in how we live our lives. For Zacchaeus, that meant paying back the money he had cheated his neighbors out of. What does repentance look like in your life? In mine? Will we spend more time and energy thinking about our own sins and need for repentance than we do about "those other people" and what they do or don't do?

John Chrysostom was a 4th century A.D. Bishop of Constantinople. He was such a good preacher he was known as "Chrysostom," which means "golden mouth." He wrote a prayer about the Christian life that describes what Zacchaeus did when he put his repentance into action. Even though we're almost to the end of the Lenten season, what Zacchaeus shows us in his response to meeting Jesus and what Chrysostom says in his prayer is good guidance for those of us who have been found by Jesus and who have seen who Jesus is.

Let us pray: *Do you fast? Give me proof of it by your works. If you see a poor man, take pity on him. If you see a friend being honored, do not envy him. Do not let only your mouth fast, but also the eye and the ear and the feet and the hands and all the members of our bodies. Let the hands fast, by being free of avarice. Let the feet fast, by ceasing to run after sin. Let the eyes fast, by disciplining them not to glare at that which is sinful. Let the ear fast, by not listening to evil talk and gossip. Let the mouth fast from foul words and unjust criticism. For what good is it if we abstain from birds and fishes, but bite and devour our brothers [and sisters]? May He who came to the world to save sinners, strengthen us to complete the fast with humility, have mercy on us, and save us. Amen.*

Let us pray: Unclutter our lives, Lord, we have too much, consume too much, expect too much. Grant us perspective to see this world through others' eyes than just our own. Grant us compassion where there is need to play our part and not turn aside. Grant us gratitude for what we have, our daily bread, the gift of life. Unclutter our lives, Lord, and give us thankful and generous hearts. Amen.

NOTES

¹Information about Ambassador Badeau's life was taken from his obituary by Lawrence Van Gelder, August 26, 1995, "J.S. Badeau, Former Envoy to Middle East, Dies at 92," *The New York Times*, www.nyti.ms. Information about cultural norms was taken from Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), p. 179.

²www.schmoop.com.

³Guy Penrod, "Every Saint Has a Past . . . Every Sinner Has a Future," www.youtube.com

⁴Sunday of Zacchaeus at www.oca.org.