

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 19:1-10

March 21, 2021

Fifth Sunday in Lent

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

**A LUKAN LENT
SOUGHT, SEEN, AND SAVED**

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

Picture it: Danny DeVito, his burlap robe bunched up around his knees, elbowing his way through the crowd as he runs toward the sycamore tree, climbs up and out on a limb. Go ahead, admit it – that’s the picture that pops into your head when you hear the story of Zacchaeus and hear the song, “Zacchaeus was a wee little man, a wee little man was he!”

Here’s how Frederick Buechner describes Zacchaeus in his book *Wishful Thinking*: “We’re told that Zacchaeus was a runt . . . That is why, when Jesus was reported to be en route to Jericho and the crowds gathered to see what they could see, Zacchaeus had to climb a tree to get a good

look . . . We’re also told that Zacchaeus was a crook – a Jewish legman for the Roman IRS, who (following the practice of the day) raked in as much more than the going tax as he could get and pocketed the difference. When people saw Zacchaeus oiling down the street, they crossed to the other side.” Of course, that’s who Zacchaeus was and what he was like. How could it be any different?

With tax season upon us, we might be expected to harbor some ill will toward the taxman. But it’s not as if the Jewish peasants of 1st century Palestine had one denarius withheld from each paycheck and could expect a refund around Passover time each April. No, the cursed occupying Romans levied heavy taxes on the people and then sent the money back to Rome to feed the masses and fund Caesar’s building projects.

The Romans would bid out the tax collecting job and demand a certain amount up front. As Buechner said, the tax collector (or, in Zacchaeus’ case, the tax superintendent) would “rake in as much more than the going tax as he could get and pocket the difference.” There were so many reasons why the people in the crowd that day would have disliked Zacchaeus . . .

. . . which makes what happens that day in Jericho all the more significant. Luke doesn’t tell us why Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus – a guilty conscience? idle curiosity? because he heard that Jesus was a friend to tax collectors and sinners? Something drove Zacchaeus to abandon all dignity and run and climb the sycamore tree to see who Jesus was. And then Jesus looked up and saw Zacchaeus and, considering how the story ends, Jesus saw the kind of person Zacchaeus was and could be.

Out of all the people there by the side of the road under the sycamore tree that day, Jesus picked Zacchaeus to spend the afternoon with. Well, that didn’t go over so

well with the crowd, did it? “All who saw it began to grumble and said, ‘He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.’” (Luke 19:7) But that’s who Jesus hangs out with in the gospel of Luke – tax collectors, women of questionable repute, and other sinners. Usually, it’s the upright religious leaders who grumble and complain, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” (Luke 5:30) In today’s story, it’s Zacchaeus’ neighbors in general – the people he ripped off to fund the Romans.

The stage is set for Zacchaeus’ repentance and rehabilitation. In fact, Jesus doesn’t even have to tell Zacchaeus “Repent!” On his own, Zacchaeus offers to give away half of everything he owns to the poor and pay back four times as much as he has cheated anyone out of, which goes way beyond the letter of the law (see, Zacchaeus himself admits he’s a cheat!). The sinful tax collector doesn’t earn his forgiveness and salvation. Instead, his heart is changed and he changes his ways when he welcomes Jesus into his house. In return, Jesus pronounces a blessing on Zacchaeus and his house, a repentant sinner is welcomed back, and all is right with the world. It’s a great story, isn’t it?

But what if that’s not what Zacchaeus was like? What if this very familiar story actually takes us in a whole different direction? And what if all of that is because of a verb tense in one verse in the entire story? Hang on to your hats!

I read the story from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, in which Zacchaeus says to Jesus, “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.” When I was translating the story this week and got to that verse, I wondered why it was rendered in the future tense in the English when the Greek clearly has the present tense. When I read the story in Monday night’s Bible study, Dr. Dan said, “Well, the King James Version says, “Behold, LORD, the half of my goods ***I give to the poor***; and if I have taken anything from any man by false accusation, ***I restore him four-fold***.” It’s as if Zacchaeus is saying, “Lord Jesus, I know what my neighbors think of me, but this is what I’m ***already*** doing!” And the implication is, Zacchaeus is planning to keep on giving half of what he owns to the poor and, if he has messed up, to make things right by paying back four times what is required by law. . .

. . . to which Jesus says, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham.” Who all heard what Zacchaeus said? and Who is Jesus talking to? If it’s a private conversation between the tax collector and the Lord, why didn’t Jesus say, “Today salvation has come to ***your house***, because ***you too are a son of Abraham***”? It’s as if Jesus wants the grumbling neighbors to hear what he has to say about Zacchaeus, to let them know that the kinds of things Zacchaeus is doing is what we might call “kingdom work,” and that God extends his grace, mercy, and salvation to all kinds of people – even tax collectors!

Here’s the thing: in Luke’s gospel, the “outsiders” are folks such as tax collectors and prostitutes and lepers and blind people and Samaritans and women and children -- “***those people***” that the good, religious leaders look down on, so much so that “tax collectors and sinners” is a catch-all phrase used again and again in Luke’s gospel.

Those stereotypes assume that all tax collectors and Samaritans, etc., etc. are a certain way. But in the gospels, there are the outliers. The Samaritan is the good neighbor. The woman at the well is a Samaritan. The one leper who comes back to say “Thank you” is a Samaritan.

And it works the other way around, also. Jesus’ opponents in the gospels are lumped together as the Pharisees, scribes, and elders. But Nicodemus the Pharisee comes to talk to Jesus and speaks up for him when the leaders are plotting to arrest and kill him. Some Pharisees warn Jesus that Herod is out to get him.

So, what if Zacchaeus is an outlier among tax collectors of his day? What if that’s the twist in this oh-so-familiar story that we already know the ending of? Here’s something to think about – the name “Zacchaeus” means “innocent” or “clean.” Is that irony and foreshadowing a dramatic conversion and redemption? Or does his name tell us something about who he is and what he does? And when Jesus saw and heard, he reconciled and restored Zacchaeus to his community and taught his neighbors a lesson about God’s grace and living the kingdom life.

A bunch of people sang or quoted “Zacchaeus was a wee little man” to me this week, and I just had to use it for the children’s sermon. Here’s a different version based on this new perspective on Zacchaeus:

*Zacchaeus was a toll-taking man, And a rich young hotshot was he.
He climbed up in a sycamore tree For the Lord he wanted to see.
And when the Savior passed that way he looked up in the tree.
He said, “Zacchaeus you come down,
For I’m going to your house today! For I’m going to your house today!”*

*Zacchaeus was an outcast man, But Abraham’s son was he.
He gave to the poor and worked for justice,
For found and loved was he, For found and loved was he.*

I hope I meet Luke one day so I can ask him, “Dr. Luke, tell me about the Zacchaeus story. What did you really mean?” Maybe Luke will say, “Well, Dr. Phil, you know what? No matter which way you read the story, the ending is the same. Jesus says, ‘Today salvation has come to this house.’ And when you meet Jesus, you meet salvation, and you see what it means to live as God’s people. It’s all about God’s grace and God’s salvation reaching out to the ones who are on the outside looking in, either because of what they’ve done or because of what people think about them. It’s all about seeking and being seen, about being lost and being found.”

Friends, isn’t that what our Lenten journey – indeed, our life journey and our journey of faith – is all about? Receiving God’s grace in Jesus Christ and extending that same grace to others!

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, take our hearts and minds, live in us today and every day. Pour your love within us that we may experience a real closeness to you. Amen.