

SEEKING AND SEEN

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.

About two weeks ago, Nancy called me at work. In a very serious and somber voice, she said, “I just walked Holden and checked the mail. We got a letter from the IRS.” Immediately, I felt my stomach drop. Then Nancy continued, “The letter says, ‘We found an error on your 2021 Form 1040, which affects the following area of your return: Self-Employment Tax. We changed your return to correct this error.’” Immediately, my mind raced to remember how much we have in our checking and savings account and what was available to correct the mistake. Then Nancy laughed and in a very light-hearted voice read, “As a result, you are due a refund.” As relief flooded over me, I said, “Thanks a lot for scaring me like that. How much is the refund?” She said, “Well, we’re not going to get rich from it -- \$39.52.” But at least that covered the dog-sitting fee while we were on vacation!

I doubt any Jewish citizens of first century Jericho ever received a letter from the tax superintendent Zacchaeus informing them they were going to receive a refund from Roman Emperor Tiberius Julius Caesar Augustus. But their stomachs probably did drop whenever they saw Zacchaeus or one of his contract workers headed to their doors to collect the Roman Imperial tax. You see, men already had to pay the annual Jewish temple tax for the upkeep and maintenance of the temple in Jerusalem. That tax equaled about two days’ wages, which might not sound like much, unless you are living a hand-to-mouth, day-to-day existence. On top of that religious tax, the Jewish people also had to pay the three main Roman taxes: (1) the direct land tax, paid on the produce of the land. Jerusalem also had a house and city sales tax; (2) the head tax, based on a periodic census, of one day’s wages per year (a man probably had to pay the tax for his wife, also); and finally (3) the customs tax collected from tolls and transportation duties. That tax might have been 2% - 5%, and on a long journey, you probably would have had to pay it several times.

The tax collectors directly collected the land tax and the head tax from their fellow Jews. The collectors may have bid for their jobs. They were responsible for remitting to Rome the required amount due. Anything over and above that amount was theirs to keep and, apparently, they used all kinds of coercive methods to get the money from their neighbors. As the “chief tax collector” or “tax administrator,” Zacchaeus would have been skimming his take from the collectors working under him, which is probably why today’s story describes him as rich.

Tax collectors in Jesus’s day had such a bad reputation, they are automatically lumped together with “sinners” in the gospels, as in “All the tax collectors and sinners were coming to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and

saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” (Luke 15:1-2) And why wouldn’t they be outcasts and considered dishonest? After all, they charged their neighbors higher interest rates and commissions than they actually had to pay, they regularly dealt with the unclean Gentile Romans, they collected taxes (none of which benefited the citizens of Judea and Galilee) for the oppressive occupying empire, and, as a final insult, the Jewish people had to pay the Roman taxes with coins that were inscribed with the name and head of the Emperor – blasphemous and idolatrous!

All of this may explain why Zacchaeus had a hard time seeing Jesus that day in Jericho. Sure, the Bible tells us he was “short in stature” (today we’d probably say he was “vertically challenged”), but imagine the reaction of the crowd that gathered by the side of the road that day. “Oh man, here comes Zacchaeus,” somebody probably grumbled. “Don’t let him get in front of us!” said another person. So, Zacchaeus climbed up in a sycamore tree, to see what he could see. Well, to be more exact, the Bible says, “He was trying to see who Jesus was . . .” – that suggests Zacchaeus was interested in more than just what Jesus looked like. It sounds like Zacchaeus was looking for something more . . .

And then an amazing thing happened. As Zacchaeus was trying to see who Jesus was, Jesus saw who Zacchaeus was. “When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, ‘Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.’” (Luke 19:5) The story is very similar to what happened on the outskirts of Jericho as Jesus approached. A blind man heard a crowd going by and they told him, “Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.” When the blind man started shouting, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” the people in the front of the crowd told him to “Shut up!” But the blind man cried out all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Jesus called him out, asked him what he wanted, and restored his sight. The blind man followed Jesus. (Luke 18:35-43) Between the story of Zacchaeus and the story of the blind man, we have the first verse of that beloved hymn, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I was once lost, but now am found, was blind but now can see.”

Zacchaeus was trying to see who Jesus was . . . and nothing was going to stop him: not his reputation, not the large crowd, not his short stature, not his sense of propriety and pride. You see, it was unseemly for a man to climb a tree like Zacchaeus did, what with his status as a rich man (no matter how he had gotten his wealth) and because of the robe he probably had on. And there’s really no elegant way to climb a tree, is there? But there he sat, up in the sycamore tree, for the Lord he wanted to see.

Here’s how Frederick Buechner imagines what happened between Zacchaeus looking down at Jesus and Jesus looking up at Zacchaeus:

“The story goes like this. The sawed-off shyster is perched in the sycamore tree. Jesus opens his mouth to speak. All Jericho hugs itself in anticipation of hearing him give the man holy hell. ‘Woe unto you! Repent! Wise up!’ is the least of what they expect. What Jesus says is, ‘Come down on the double. I’m staying at your house.’ The mob points out that the man Jesus is talking to is a public disaster. Jesus’ silence is deafening.

“It is not reported how Zacchaeus got out of the sycamore, but the chances

are good that he fell out in pure astonishment. He said, 'I'm giving everything back. In spades.' Maybe he even meant it. Jesus said, 'Three cheers for the Irish!'

“The unflagging lunacy of God. The unending seaminess of human beings. The meeting between them that is always a matter of life or death and usually both. The story of Zacchaeus is the gospel in sycamore. It is the best and oldest joke in the world.”¹

“The unflagging lunacy of God” – maybe we could call it “the unflagging grace of God” or “the unflagging salvation of God” or even “the unflagging love of God in Jesus Christ.” And the grace, salvation, and love of God in Jesus Christ meet the unending seaminess of human life – of both the tax superintendent clinging to the limb in the sycamore tree who was looking for Jesus and the grumbling crowd standing at the base of the tree who had written Zacchaeus off as beyond hope.

Do you ever wonder what became of Zacchaeus? He spontaneously responded to Jesus's visit by promising to give half of his possessions to the poor and to make good four times over to anybody he cheated. Do you reckon he was able to keep that up after Jesus left Jericho for Jerusalem? Do you suppose Zacchaeus continued being a tax collector? After all, taxes were a reality of life then just as they are now. When tax collectors asked John the Baptist, in response to his sermon on repentance for the forgiveness of sins, “What should we do?” John answered, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” (Luke 3:13) When the religious leaders sent spies to trap Jesus by asking, “Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” Jesus confounded them by telling them, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.” (Luke 20:20-26)

Oh, by the way, did you know that the name “Zacchaeus” is of Greek origin and means “pure, innocent”? Pair that with the origin of Jesus's own name – from “Joshua” which means “God is salvation” – and you get that meeting Frederick Buechner was talking about, that matter of life and death. Jesus said, “Today salvation/I have come to your house.” Jesus lived up to his name. Perhaps after seeing who Jesus really was, Zacchaeus was finally able to live up to his name. According to tradition, Zacchaeus later accompanied St. Peter on his travels, was appointed Bishop of Caesarea, and died there in peace. Zacchaeus even has his own day in the Orthodox tradition – April 20 – which, ironically, is less than one week past the IRS filing deadline!

We only meet Zacchaeus here in these ten verses in Luke's gospel. But his legacy lives on in certain religious traditions. In the Orthodox Church, five weeks before the beginning of Lent, the Sunday of Zacchaeus is celebrated and the gospel story is read. According to one Orthodox website, “Let us begin our preparation for the Great Fast in all earnestness and seriousness. Let us stop deluding ourselves into thinking that we are the best that we can be and therefore have no room for improvement. Let us imitate Zacchaeus and let us desire to see Jesus with all our heart, all our mind, and all our strength. Let us put all other things aside as we prepare. Let us place God first in our minds, in our hearts and in our souls. Then we shall truly have begun our preparation for the Great Feast.”² In other words, “Just as

Zacchaeus ‘sought to see who Jesus was’ (Luke 19:3), that same desire and effort to see Jesus starts the movement through Lent towards Easter.”³

What to make of Zacchaeus? Well, he was determined to see Jesus. And when Jesus saw him, his life was changed, and not just in some inwardly, private, spiritual way. Zacchaeus showed in his life what a difference it made when salvation came to his house one day. So, maybe we can be less like the crowd that apparently wrote Zacchaeus off as beyond the reach of God’s love and mercy and unworthy of their fellowship, and be more like Zacchaeus, who looked for Jesus, welcomed Jesus, and responded to Jesus in a life-changing way.

In the preface to his 2009 book on St. Augustine, then Jorge Mario Cardinal Bergoglio, Archbishop of Buenos Aires, wrote: “Some believe that faith and salvation come with our effort to look for, to seek the Lord. Whereas it’s the opposite: you are saved when the Lord looks for you, when He looks at you and you let yourself be looked at and sought for. The Lord will look for you first. And when you find Him, you understand that He was waiting there looking at you, He was expecting you from beforehand. That is salvation: He loves you beforehand. And you let yourself be loved.”⁴

Four years later, in his first year as Pope Francis, Jorge Mario Bergoglio delivered a homily about Zacchaeus. His words are worth hearing: “We look at Zacchaeus in the tree today: it’s ridiculous, but it is an act of salvation. And I say to you, if you have something weighing your conscience down, if you have done many things, stop for a bit and think that there is someone waiting for you . . . I tell you that Jesus never gets tired of forgiving.”⁵

Let us pray: Lord God of love and peace, open our hearts today to receive the invitation of Jesus to come and be present in our lives. Amen.

NOTES

¹Frederick Buechner, “Zacchaeus,” in *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973)

²“On the Sunday of Zacchaeus,” at www.arizonaorthodox.com.

³“Apostle Zacchaeus,” at www.orthodoxwiki.com.

⁴Fr. Sean Coyle, October 27, 2016 at www.bangortobobbio.blogspot.com.

⁵Patricia Kasten, “When taxes came due in Jesus’ time,” April 15, 2016 at www.thecompassnews.org.