

## Zacchaeus: What's in a Name?

Elder and Transitional Presbytery Leader Mary McClung

Our second reading from scripture this morning comes from the New Testament's gospel of Luke and before I read it, I would like to place it in context. In Luke's gospel there is a long narrative stretch that encompasses more than a third of his gospel and it relates what happened during the time when Jesus was traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem to keep the Passover.

In these roughly ten chapters, which are often referred to as Luke's travel narrative, Jesus shares parables, stories and other teachings with his disciples. In fact, some of Jesus' best known parables, like the prodigal son and the good Samaritan, as well as the story of Zacchaeus are only found in Luke.

Just prior to the story of Zacchaeus, Jesus has been preparing the disciples for what would soon happen to him in Jerusalem - his imminent death and his resurrection. Shortly after his encounter with Zacchaeus, Jesus arrives in Jerusalem and enters the city in what we know as Palm Sunday.

### SCRIPTURE LUKE 19:1-10 NRSV

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it. **2** A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. **3** He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. **4** So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. **5** 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." **6** So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. **7** All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." **8** Zacchaeus 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." **9** Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. **10** For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

It's good to be with you this morning and good to be able to take a closer look at God's Word and wonder together, "Why is Zacchaeus included in God's story?"

Zacchaeus. Short dude. Weird name. Noticed by God.

The first thing we learn from scripture about Zacchaeus, right out of the gate, is that "he was a tax collector in Jericho and was rich." Jericho was a large city in the Roman Empire and it was the center of the lucrative production and export of balsam. In addition, King Herod of Antipas had a grand royal palace there. So Jericho was a major center of taxation and Zacchaeus' position as chief tax collector was important to Rome.

To finance their great world empire, the Romans levied heavy taxes on all nations that were under their control. Tax collectors purchased the right to collect taxes on behalf of Rome but then charged more than what they owed to the empire, and kept the rest as profit for

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themselves. By definition then, all tax collectors in that day were wealthy because they were corrupt.

The Jews detested these taxes because they supported a foreign government and that government's pagan gods rather than their own Jewish community and the One God of Israel. Tax collectors were among the most unpopular people in Israel, to say the least. They were traitors – they were Jews by birth, who worked for Rome.

And Zacchaeus wasn't just a tax collector, he was a chief tax collector which meant that he had many minions collecting on his behalf. He knowingly and willfully defrauded others in order to make a good profit for himself. And his choice of profession made him into a pariah, an outcast, a guy everybody despised. He was well known... for all the wrong reasons.

But this was a man who scripture tells us in verse three "was trying to see who Jesus was". Unfortunately, there was an obstacle: the crowd. Because of the crowd, Zacchaeus couldn't get close enough to see Jesus and because Zacchaeus was short in stature, he couldn't see over the crowd.

Now, imagine being a member of that crowd of people who knew Zacchaeus and knew what he did for a living and for whom he worked. I don't think it's a stretch to wonder if the crowd had purposely blocked this "sinner" from getting through to see Jesus. This didn't deter Zacchaeus, however. Instead, he ran ahead with a pressing sense of expectation and putting his dignity aside - remember he was a man of high position and importance - he climbed up the low branches of a nearby sycamore tree, placing himself in Jesus' path.

And Jesus noticed him.

"When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus'"

And if you're a member of that crowd you had to be thinking, "Finally! Finally Zacchaeus' deeds have caught up to him and he is going to get what's coming." They had to be hoping the rabbi Jesus, the teacher was going to name Zacchaeus as a corrupt traitor, one who richly profited at their expense.

At least, I imagine that's something along the lines of what they were hoping would happen. They detested that man, and they would have had reason to think that Zacchaeus could be called out by a rabbi because of his greed.

But God's ways are not our ways and instead of calling him out, Jesus calls out to him by name, "Zacchaeus."

Now, consider your own name. What does it feel like when someone calls your name when you're not expecting it? Maybe, a jolt, a frisson of excitement, a wave of recognition, knowing

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that you have been noticed. Jesus knew Zacchaeus' name, spoke it out loud and brought him out into the open, drawing the crowd's attention. Interestingly, the name Zacchaeus is the Greek form of a Hebrew name meaning, of all things, pure. And Jesus called out to him by name, "Zacchaeus (pure), hurry and come down; for I *must stay* at your house today."

This isn't the first time Jesus had noticed an individual in the crowd and extended a personal invitation. To Zacchaeus the surprising invitation from Jesus was urgent, "I must stay at your house. Today." In staying at his house, which would have included fellowship at the table, Jesus was expressing approval and acceptance of Zacchaeus.

It's something we have seen Jesus do before with outcasts; and rather than being defiled by the company of a "sinner," Jesus accepted and welcomed Zacchaeus which removed him from his marginalized position and placed him back within the community.

Jesus, who we learned in the first verse had been simply "passing through" Jericho on his way to Jerusalem, decided to stay.

Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man too is a son of Abraham." And speaking of himself, Jesus says, "For the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost."

There it is, in a nutshell: Jesus tells us that he came to seek out and save those who are lost. That's why a man like Zacchaeus is included in God's story. God has made it God's work to call people out of sinfulness and into glorious light. Salvation from God begins with God.

Clearly, God is merciful and generous because Jesus, the very presence of God's salvation in the world, chose Zacchaeus to be His host. This morally repugnant man is offered the gracious gift of salvation through Jesus because that's what Jesus does - he seeks out and saves the lost.

Well, Zacchaeus accepted the invitation of Jesus to stay and abide with him, the invitation that indicated Jesus' acceptance, "so he (Zacchaeus) hurried down and was happy to welcome him." But not everyone was happy. Jesus' offer to stay with Zacchaeus stunned the crowd and the crowd did not like it. We know this because scripture tells us, "All who saw it began to grumble and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.'" Imagine the looks on their faces. Everyone who saw it grumbled. Everyone saw Zacchaeus as a "sinner"

Look, there's a part of me that doesn't want this guy to be a part of God's story because he is so morally repugnant. It doesn't seem fair. This man was horrible! He sinned against God and he hurt people.

But I'm grateful he is a part of God's story because I wonder if I'm more like Zacchaeus than I would care to admit. Granted, I'm not a corrupt traitor who has purposely defrauded the people

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in my community, but I know that I do things that are wrong in God's eyes and that my actions have had consequences that have hurt people. I may not have grown rich off of others but I have hurt others in ways that giving away half of my stuff can't undo.

We have all done wrong things. We have all hurt others. That's our human condition, none of us are exempt. It's why each week in worship we confess and are offered the promise of God's forgiveness. If my mother were here, she would tell you it's her favorite part of the worship service. And on some Sundays, it's mine. We're imperfect people in need of the One who seeks out and saves the lost. The One who brings salvation and healing and restoration.

And God didn't wait for Zacchaeus to clean himself up before extending the invitation. When Jesus met Zacchaeus while passing through Jericho, Jesus was headed to Jerusalem to his death on a cross - and to his resurrection, bringing us new life.

It was true for Zacchaeus: salvation had come to his house that very day. And if God made a way for Zacchaeus, then the person you find most morally repugnant? The person you may have had in mind while you've been listening? Maybe someone at work, in your neighborhood, a public figure? God knows even that person's name too. And it's why Jesus came to us.

I wonder if sometimes we think there is someone too far gone and beyond Jesus' reach. There's not.

And I wonder if sometimes we're like the crowd - unhappy when someone we find horrible is accepted by Jesus. Probably, because that means that we may need to take a second look at that morally repugnant sinner - not as the crowd did, but as Jesus did.

And I wonder - this is one that I consider from time to time - I wonder if and how I may be an obstacle to someone who is looking to see who Jesus is.

Scripture tells us that Zacchaeus 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." While Zacchaeus doesn't say, "I repent!" he clearly had changed; we see that in his generous response.

His life now reflected his confession that Jesus is Lord. Did you catch that? At the beginning of the story, Zacchaeus wanted to see who Jesus was and now near the end of the story, which is told in only ten verses, Zacchaeus came to understand who Jesus was and was able to call Him by His name: LORD.

The Lord says in Isaiah 43:1, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name and you are mine." The God who redeems us knows us by name. God, who is the giver and renewer of life, knows my name and knows your name and calls us to respond in obedience and faith.

And that, friends, is Good News! Amen.