

Climb Down from Your Tree
A Sermon on Luke 19:1-10
Proper 26
November 3, 2019

Introduction

Zacchaeus is one of the best stories in the gospels for a children's sermon. He has a funny name. He is a wee little man. He climbs a tree because he wants to see Jesus. Kids can identify with him.

There also is lots in this story for adults to identify with, too. The details are so charming that it is easy to overlook what the story means.

First Move: Zacchaeus the Outcast

The story of Zacchaeus is at the end of Luke's travel narrative. The journey to Jerusalem takes up the middle ten chapters in the Gospel of Luke.

Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem in Luke 9:51. It reminds us of Isaiah, who "set his face like flint" to deliver his prophecy to Israel. Isaiah set his face like flint, even though he would suffer and face a trial because of his words. Jesus faces the same sort of trial in Jerusalem. The word that he brings from God will be rejected, just as Isaiah's was.

Jesus begins the travel narrative in Galilee, far to the north of Jerusalem. He has been traveling south as he has been telling his parables about the rich and the poor. Today he is almost there. He has reached Jericho, about 15 miles from Jerusalem.

Zacchaeus is in Jericho, waiting for Jesus. Luke tells us that Zacchaeus was a head tax collector and he was rich.

Tax collectors were despised by Jews in the first century. Rome required Palestine to pay taxes to support the Roman army. The taxes were imposed on farmers' crops. Tax collectors were seen as traitors and as cheaters. They were Jews who were hired by the Romans to collect taxes from other Jews. They collaborated with the enemy. They paid the taxes for a village in advance to Rome and then collected as much taxes from the farmers in that village to make a profit. Tax collectors were considered sinners because they participated in a program to extort money from Jews to give it to Romans and make themselves rich in the process. Luke

tells us that Zacchaeus was a head tax collector. He would have profited the most from this system.

Jesus has been surprisingly open to tax collectors in his ministry. He called Levi, a tax collector, to be one his disciples. He eats with tax collectors and sinners. The parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector lifts up the Tax Collector as a model of piety.

Luke's audience would have mixed feelings about a tax collector after hearing the earlier stories in Luke's gospel. The crowd in today's story has no mixed feelings. They despise Zacchaeus. They despise him because he is rich and because he is a tax collector.

The crowd blocks his view. Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus, but he can't because of the crowd. The crowd would have made room for a person of high honor.

Then Luke tells us how we should see Zacchaeus. He wants to see Jesus. It is so important for him to see Jesus that he runs ahead and climbs a sycamore tree.

It was undignified for an Oriental gentleman to run. It reminds us of the father running to meet the Prodigal Son. It's still undignified for a gentleman to run. Can you imagine a corporate lawyer in a silk suit running and climbing a tree? When was the last time you were in a tree? These trees are evergreens. They are sticky. Zacchaeus would be getting tree sap all over his expensive clothes.

The text also says that Zacchaeus is short. It's another sign that he is a nobody in the eyes of the crowd. For Luke, it's a sign that he is an outcast.

Then the miracle in the story happens. Jesus stops. He has been setting his face to Jerusalem for the past 10 chapters. He's almost there, but he stops. He stops because he sees Zacchaeus in the tree.

Jesus doesn't see what the crowd sees. The crowd sees Zacchaeus as a contemptible little man. Sitting by himself up in a tree, covered with sweat and tree sap.

Jesus sees the inner beauty of Zacchaeus; Jesus sees the inside of the cup. He calls Zacchaeus by name. He says, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for today it is necessary to me to stay in your house." Jesus invites himself over for supper and to spend the night.

Zacchaeus does exactly as Jesus requests. He hurries and comes down. He rejoices and shows hospitality to him. Again, it reminds us of the joy and the hospitality of the father when he welcomes home the Prodigal Son.

When Jesus honors Zacchaeus, the crowd is grumbling. It is not just the Pharisees and the scribes who are grumbling, as in Chapter 15. Even the disciples and

the other followers of Christ grumble. Zacchaeus is a sinner. Why is Jesus honoring him?

The traditional interpretation of this text is that Zacchaeus is so moved that he repents, he changes his way of life. He says he will give half his possessions to the poor and if he has obtained anything from anyone by intimidation, he will give back four times. Most translations use the future tense. Zacchaeus *will* give his possessions to the poor and *will* repay those he has defrauded.

An alternative view has been gathering support in the past 40 years. I believe it is more persuasive. The alternative view points out that the verbs are in the present tense not the future. I give, not I will give. The present tense in Greek also suggests continuing action. I am giving to the poor. It is my present practice to give to the poor. When Zacchaeus tithes, he gives one half instead of one tenth.

Zacchaeus' name is the Greek form of the Hebrew name, Zakkai. Zakkai means pure and innocent. The name could be Luke's way of saying that Zacchaeus is innocent of the charges that the people hold against him. He is innocent of being a sinner.

In the alternative view, Jesus sees Zacchaeus for who he really is. That's why he stops. He wants to honor Zacchaeus and welcome him back into the community.

Jesus says, "Today, salvation has occurred to this house because he, too, is a son of Abraham, for the son of man came to seek out and to save what has been lost."

The primary meaning of the Greek verb $\sigma\acute{\omega}\zeta\omega$ is save, and the noun form, $\sigma\omega\tau\eta\rho\acute{\iota}\alpha$, means salvation. Both words have multiple meanings. They can also mean deliverance. In the Old Testament salvation meant deliverance from enemies. We see Psalm after Psalm where the author is praying for God to deliver him from his enemies.

$\Sigma\acute{\omega}\zeta\omega$ can also mean rescue. Jesus came to seek out and save or rescue Zacchaeus. Jesus is bringing him back into the flock. He calls him a son of Abraham and restores him to community with all the sons of Abraham in the crowd.

Later Christian tradition stripped away the other meanings and interpreted salvation to mean a ticket to heaven. When people say they are saved today, that's usually what they mean. They believe in Jesus and now they have a ticket to heaven.

If we fill the words with their multiple meanings, they came close to describing what the Jews call shalom: being restored to wholeness or fullness.

Second Move: The Gospel of the Outcast

Chapters 15 through 19 in Luke are sometimes called the Gospel of the Outcast. It is a series of parables with a motley crew of characters.

In Chapter 15 there are the parables about a shepherd who loses a sheep, an old woman who loses a coin and a son who goes through his inheritance and has to get work feeding pigs. There is an elder brother who is resentful of his younger brother.

In Chapter 16 there is a wicked manager, who dissipates his master's wealth, and Lazarus, who lies at a rich man's gate with dogs licking at his sores.

In Chapter 17 there is a worthless slave and ten lepers. One of the lepers is thankful, the other nine are not.

In Chapter 18 we have a vengeful widow who pesters a unjust judge. He gives her what she wants just to get rid of her. There is a Pharisee who gives thanks to God that he is not like the rest of the men in the Temple: robbers, unrighteous, adulterers or even this tax collector. There are little children that the disciples try to keep from bothering Jesus. There is a rich ruler who goes away dejected because Jesus tells him to give away all his wealth. And there is a blind beggar.

Today we have a chief tax collector, who has gotten rich by collaborating with the Romans.

These are the people that populate the kingdom. They are not perfect; they all have flaws. You wouldn't tell your children to imitate any of them.

Jesus makes them all whole. He finds a place for them in the Beloved Community.

He even makes a place for the ones who are offended by the outcasts: the elder brother, the Pharisee who compares himself favorably to the tax collector, and the crowd who grumbles about Zacchaeus.

The only people who are excluded from the kingdom are those who exclude themselves: the Rich Man who ignores the Law and the Prophets all his life and refuses to help Lazarus, and the young ruler who goes away dejected because he can't part with any of his wealth.

Third Move: Bringing Outcasts and Purists Together

The only question that we ask as Disciples of Christ is whether you can make the same confession that Peter made: Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God. Our unity comes through Christ. Saints and sinners are part of the body of Christ. Jesus welcomes us, just as he welcomes Zacchaeus. We all have a contribution to make in the kingdom.

I hope there is no social media in the kingdom. It is impossible to be pure enough to satisfy social media. If you ever venture out with a moral or political conviction [and if you have a lot of “friends”), you will probably be attacked by the purists on the extreme left, who will see you as a privileged white male who is part of the problem and should just be quiet and listen. Purists on the extreme right will criticize you for being a leftist radical or a Trump hater. The purists can’t see the inside of the cup and they don’t care. They want to judge everyone who is different from them and stereotype them as outcasts.

To understand what motivates the purists, we can turn to our old friend, Jonathan Haidt, the social psychologist. Haidt writes in *The Righteous Mind* that disgust/sanctity is one of the moral foundations that all cultures share. People innately believe that some things, some actions and some people are noble, pure and elevated, while others are base, polluted and degraded. It is good to have a sense of the sacred; awe and wonder are fundamental religious emotions. This sense of morality binds us together, but it also blinds us. “It binds us into ideological teams that fight each other as though the fate of the world depended on our side winning each battle. It blinds us to the fact that each team is composed of good people who have something important to say.”

Conservatives tend to view the body as a temple that is polluted by illicit sex. They sanctify capitalism and religion as institutions that strengthen society. Progressives tend to see bodies as being polluted by toxins, pesticides and chemicals. They see the institutions of industrialism, capitalism, patriarchy and racism as poisons that degrade society.

It would be the progressives today who would be more likely to be disgusted by a person’s occupation, or, even more, by a person’s employer. Wall Street, WalMart, Chick-Fil-A, Hobby Lobby, the fossil-fuel industry—all have been boycotted or have been the subject of protest marches by progressive causes.

Jesus would somehow find a way to reach out to the purists. They *are* acting out of their sense of the common good. If they seem tribal to others, it might be because they believe their tribe has a better understanding of the common good.

Jesus gives us a unifying vision of the common good. His parables about the kingdom challenge stereotypes and conventional wisdom. They force us to be open to new possibilities. There are people in the kingdom we would never think belong there.

I would like to believe that Jesus would not tweet or post on FaceBook. He would talk to people in person instead. He would encourage people to ask questions to clear up any misunderstandings.

The purists reflect the divisions in our society. They can't see what we have in common. People need to start asking questions of each other instead of just assuming that they are stupid or evil. Then they might see the inside of the cup.

There are plenty of pressing problems confronting society—climate change, racial injustice, unaffordable health care, immigration reform, curbing gun violence, for starters. We can't get anything done unless we start working together with people of different perspectives to find common ground and work toward the common good.

Conclusion

Salvation is about climbing down from your tree. Jesus calls out to us to come down; he reassures us and accepts us. You don't have to feel isolated. The folks in Jesus' community will accept us, too.

For our society to progress toward becoming a Beloved Community, we need to see each and every person as a beloved child of God, whether they act like one or not. Outcasts are welcome. Purists, too.

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