

Zacchaeus: This is What Salvation Looks Like

Luke 19: 1-10

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When I was a child I loved to sing. I liked church because there was singing there. What I like about Sunday School was the singing before hand. I wasn't a fan of the crafts but I liked the singing.

I had a few favorite Sunday School songs. I liked the songs with actions. Like the Zacchaeus song:

*Zacchaeus was a wee little man, a wee little man was he,  
He climbed up in a sycamore tree, for the Lord he wanted to see.  
And as the Savior passed that way, he looked up in the tree:  
And he said, "Zacchaeus, you come down!"  
For I'm going to your house today, for I'm going to your house today.*

Very nice, happy, little song. I liked to sing and shout the song.

Fast forward a few years, I'm in seminary, in a Christian Education class, and the professor says, "does anyone know the Zacchaeus song?" "Yeah, I know the Zacchaeus song!" "It's a lousy song," she said. "What?! What do you mean?" "The song says nothing about the meaning of the story. The song doesn't teach anything." "Oh, I suppose you're right." "And the story has important meaning."

This is a surprising and amazing little story.

Last week, we talked about what was happening in the 15th chapter of the book of Luke. Jesus was responding to the grumbling of the scribes and Pharisees. They are grumbling because Jesus is eating with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus starts telling stories about lost things, a lost sheep, a lost coin. If you lost these things, what would you do? You would search for them until you found them, and then you would celebrate. Then Jesus tells the story of a lost person, the prodigal son, who throws his life away, but then comes to himself, humbles himself.

He returns to his father, trusting in love to do something, and his father welcomes him home extravagantly. Love and grace do more than we think is possible.

As you continue through Luke, Jesus is talking a lot about money and riches, the poor, forgiveness. Jesus heals people. Jesus is just about ready to enter into Jerusalem and start his journey toward the cross but he is passing through Jericho on the way.

As he is approaching Jericho, a blind man is on the roadside begging. The blind man cries out to Jesus. Jesus asks, "what do you want me to do for you." The blind man says, "I want to see again." Jesus heals him and goes on his way. He then enters Jericho and encounters Zacchaeus.

What is interesting is that the story of Zacchaeus is paired with this miracle story of the healing of this blind man. The Zacchaeus story is structured like the miracle story. We are supposed to read it like a miracle story. What is going to happen to Zacchaeus is also miraculous. Zacchaeus is also blind and is waiting to see.

As Jesus is entering Jericho and passing through it we are told that Zacchaeus is there, and he is a chief Tax Collector and he is rich. According to scholar R. Alan Culpepper, *"In Luke, the tax collectors function as the prototypical outcasts - those whom Jesus befriends. Roman officials contracted with local entrepreneurs to collect the prescribed indirect taxes, tolls, tariffs, and customs fees in a given area. These entrepreneurs, the 'chief tax collectors,' were required to pay the contract in advance. They would then employ others to collect the taxes with the hope that the amount collected would yield a profit. The system, not surprisingly, was open to abuse, and Jews who collected taxes for the Romans were assumed to be dishonest and were hated by other Jews for their complicity with the Gentile oppressors."*

Zacchaeus is rich because he is taking advantage of other people, and people hate him for it.

Zacchaeus is like a Pay-Day lender, offering you a high interest loan when you are in dire circumstances and then it's only later that you realize how much he's fleeced you. Add to that, he's working for and getting rich by a government that is occupying you.

The challenging thing here is that Jesus is hanging out with people like Zacchaeus. It is important not to gloss over this and to feel the tension here. Imagine the people that you wouldn't associate with. Jesus is sitting with them. We need to give the scribes and Pharisees a place to stand. Jesus would be irritating all of us. He's doing stuff that's weird. There's guilt by association. Jesus is hanging out with the wrong people, but he's determined to leave the door open to change. He believes that God leaves the door open to change. No one believes him. We won't believe him. He's walking with hope.

Zacchaeus hears Jesus is in town, and he runs. Last week we saw the Father of the Prodigal Son run to meet him. Men in the first century don't run. It isn't dignified. It is certainly unseemly for a man to climb a tree. There's something Zacchaeus really wants. He needs to see Jesus as he's passing through. He wants something more than catching a glimpse of celebrity. He wants to be rescued from his soul crushing life.

Jesus sees Zacchaeus in the tree and says, "Come down, I'm going to your house." It might annoy us if someone invited themselves over to our house, but in the first century this was something that honored the host. Jesus is honoring Zacchaeus, exalting him, honoring his dignity.

The crowd is grumbling, muttering under their breath speaking out loud. We would be doing the same. "What's Jesus doing going over to that house? Why is Jesus honoring that guy?"

To this grumbling, Zacchaeus speaks, and remember we are to be reading this as a miracle story. As a story that shows the amazing things that can be done with the power of God. "Look," Zacchaeus says. "I'm going to change my life. I'm going to give half of my possessions to the poor. To anyone I've cheated, I'm going to pay back four times as much." Zacchaeus has got a long list.

Jesus says, "salvation has come to this house." Salvation. That's the big faith word. I think it is very important that the word "salvation" is used here. We don't feel very comfortable saying the word salvation. We just let the evangelicals have that word. For Evangelicals, salvation means the rescuing of the soul. If you believe the right things, that Jesus is your Savior, then you will make it to the afterlife, or the good afterlife. If you don't, you won't. That's become the generally accepted understanding of salvation.

What Jesus is talking about here has nothing to do with that. Zacchaeus' life is being rescued, he has been delivered, because his relationship with possessions and his relationships with other people are being transformed. A healing salve is being placed on the life of Zacchaeus because he's acknowledging his dishonesty and making things right. There's a wholeness spreading out from the house of Zacchaeus because what Zacchaeus is doing is affecting other people and other lives. What Zach is doing is making the world right.

The Gospel of Luke gives us powerful images of what "saving the world" looks like. We have Mary's Magnificat at the beginning of Luke where Mary sings of how God enacts powerful reversals, "bringing down the powerful from their thrones/and lifting up the lowly/ filling the hungry with good things/and sending the rich away empty." In the fourth chapter of Luke, Jesus introduces his ministry by preaching from Isaiah in Nazareth saying, "The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, recovery of sight to the blind and let the oppressed go free."

All of these things are happening to Zacchaeus. He is powerful but he is changing and lifting up the lowly. His change is filling the hungry with good things. He is recovering his sight and that is letting the oppressed free. He has changed when no one thought he could. It is a miracle.

Salvation for Zacchaeus is personal but it is also political. Not political in a partisan sense. Political like the polis, having to do with the health of society, of the community. His life is changing for the better and that means others are too.

A few verses earlier, Jesus tells the disciples that it is easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God. But here we see a rich man going through the eye of a needle. It is possible for restoration to happen and for healing to happen. Anything is possible with God. The love of God is working to heal lives and upend injustice all the time.

I saw the cartoon on the front of the bulletin in the New Yorker. It's funny because it shows two guys who don't want to follow the teaching, but are trying to figure out how to get around it. It's funny because it cuts through all the nonsense to tell the truth about how human beings often are. The Zacchaeus story is surprising because it shows one person taking this teaching seriously, and it invites us to imagine all the good that happens because of it.

We proclaim that this is what the church is about. We carry these stories of the miraculous love of God working changes in our lives, changes that start healing more than our lives, changes that bring wholeness to the lives of others too. We proclaim a word of hope. Sometimes we trust it and sometimes we don't. But we keep living in the story.

Amen.