

Zacchaeus and Verb Tense
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Luke 19:1-10

On its surface, and through the lens of tradition,
this is a story about repentance.

Zacchaeus was a wealthy tax collector.

His name meant “righteous one,” which is clearly ironic.

Many scholars tell us that tax collectors were despised by the Jews for two reasons.

First, they were considered traitors to the Jewish people
because they worked for the Roman government.

Second, they made their money by charging more than the Romans required.
Since people depended upon the tax collectors to tell them
what Rome required,

the tax collectors could charge as much as they wanted,
or as much as they could get away with,
and keep the surplus.

Since Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector and he was wealthy,
he must have cheated a great deal.

Preachers and theologians have made a big deal over the years
about the fact that Zacchaeus was short,
using it as a metaphor for some moral limitation.

This is how one preacher describes his situation:

“Zacchaeus is small in stature, but the detail directs our attention
not to how tall he was, but how small his vision was.

Despite all his wealth and authority over others,
his job made him a despised outsider.

Think of his resentment, his defensiveness, his indignation, and his anger.

Why should he have any empathy with those in the crowd –
they hated him and we may suppose he hated them too.

He climbs a tree to see who this Jesus is

because they won’t let him get to the front to see.

We might imagine him gritting his teeth and saying to himself

‘I won’t be pushed aside; I will see for myself; they won’t stop me!’

I can’t think of anything but anger

that would have got a proud man like him up a tree.”¹

¹ <http://www.preacherrhetorica.com/proper-26c-4th-bf-advent.html>

That's what one preacher says, and I don't know—maybe she or he is right.
 But to me, anger is often a presenting emotion, rather than the truest deep emotion.
 Maybe it was loneliness or the search for some meaning that drove him up the tree.
 Or maybe there was something about Jesus that intrigued Zacchaeus
 enough to take the risk.

We are told that Jesus looked up, saw Zacchaeus, and called to him by name.

I wonder how long it had been since that had happened.

Surely he was called “the tax collector” or “that cheat”

or some other disparaging title.

Not only did Jesus call him by name, but said, for everyone to hear,

“I must stay at your house today.”

Everybody knew that staying at someone's house was a sign of approval—
 that's why everybody got mad at Jesus for doing it!

They said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.”

But obviously the hand of friendship that Jesus offered to Zacchaeus
 was significant to him,

for he immediately repented of his past misdeeds.

From now on, I will give half of my possessions to the poor,

and if I have defrauded anyone, I will pay them back four times as much.

Salvation came to Zacchaeus's house that day because of his change of heart.

This is a beautiful story of repentance,

and of the difference that Christ can make in our lives.

God sees us, calls us by name, and regardless of our reputation or past deeds,

God wants to be in communion with us, in relationship with us.

God loves and forgives us.

For those of us who have done things of which we are ashamed,

which is probably most of us,

this is a comforting and important message.

I am thankful for this message,

and it is one valid interpretation of the text.

But recent scholars have found something else in the text,

something that offers a completely different understanding.

For this view, we need to look at the grammar.

The translation most often used of verse 8 has Zacchaeus saying:

“Look, half of my possessions I will give to the poor;

and if I have defrauded anyone of anything,
I will pay back four times as much.”

But that is not a literal translation.

The verb tense used in the original Greek is not future tense—
I will give to the poor.

It is present tense—I give to the poor.

Plus, Zacchaeus says this in response to the people grumbling about Jesus
going to the house “of one who is a sinner.”

They call him a sinner and he responds,

“Look, half of my possessions, I give to the poor;
and if I have defrauded anyone, I pay back four times as much.”

The implication is that he already does these things.

If this is correct, it isn’t ironic that the name “Zacchaeus” means “righteous one,”
because it turns out that maybe he is.

Some scholars disagree about the role of tax collectors,
saying they weren’t all successful and they weren’t all cheats,
and he may have inherited his money.

So there is no proof in the story that Zacchaeus was a sinner
just because the people called him one.

So “maybe the story is not about a sinner who shocks us by repenting,
but about the crowd that demonizes a person it doesn’t like
with all sorts of false assumptions.”²

“Jesus is once again turning our world upside down,
confronting us with our assumptions about who is good and who is evil
and demonstrating for us the tricks we play in our minds
before we treat one another.

Like the crowd murmuring about Zacchaeus, it is easy to be blinded
by our prejudice of ‘those people.’”³

Last night we turned at least part of Northfield upside down
when we held Northfield’s first Gospel Drag Show.

As I said last night, we called it a gospel show because it brought good news—
good news of affirmation, acceptance, and love.

But not everybody was feeling the love.

The protestors were every bit as horrible as I feared.

They shouted such hateful things and made horrific accusations
against everyone who attended.

² <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20131028JJ.shtml>

³ Elizabeth Kaeton, as quoted on <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20131028JJ.shtml>

I think some of them honestly believe we had half naked people in here
 and that we were grooming children for pedophilia.
 And you know what? If I thought that's what was happening, I would protest, too.
 But they had been brainwashed into believing lies about gay people—
 lies about perverts and abominations,
 lies that the church has told.
 Now, maybe I'm giving them too much credit to say they have been brainwashed.
 Maybe they have created a narrative in their own heads
 because they are looking for an excuse for the hate they harbor.
 Either way, they spewed their venom on everyone who came to the show.

Some of you admitted that it took courage to attend.
 You hadn't experienced that kind of hate before,
 and you didn't realize how brave you would have to be.
 Others of you have children who are gay or trans,
 and last night opened your eyes even more
 to what your children may have experienced.
 Others of you knew exactly how brave you would have to be
 because you have lived it.
 And the lies were triggers of voices in your past
 who condemned and rejected you.
 You knew exactly the toll it would take.
 And still you came.
 And I am so proud of you!

Lots of people came.
 When I closed the reservation site to keep the protestors from getting admittance,
 we had around 130 reservations.
 Last night 175 people gathered in this space with so much energy and so much joy
 I thought we'd raise the roof.
 Several of the performers spoke about how much it meant to them
 to be invited to perform in a church—
 because their whole, true self was welcome in the house of God.
 I think audience members felt it, too.
 I can't tell you how many people thanked me for holding the event,
 and although I got lots of thanks and kudos last night,
 they belong to you.
 They belong to you for being the church I knew you to be.
 Not one person suggested we cancel the event.
 The Council members all told me they had my back.

Members of the Open & Affirming team spent many hours here—
 some of them here for 6 or 7 hours yesterday.

This was a team effort.

It was community.

It was church in the best sense of the word.

Remember what Jesus says to Zacchaeus:

“Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham.”

In the first view of this story this means either that salvation has come
 because Zacchaeus repented, or because Jesus himself is salvation.

But in our second reading of this story, salvation has come because
 Jesus declares that Zacchaeus, too, is a son of Abraham,
 which was a public pronouncement of his rightful place in the community.
 He is not an outcast. He belongs.

The highlight of last night’s show for me personally
 was when one of the performers did the song “You Say” by Lauren Daigle.
 Lauren Daigle is a contemporary Christian artist and the song is addressed to God.
 The lyrics are:

I keep fighting voices in my mind that say I'm not enough.
 Every single lie that tells me I will never measure up.
 Am I more than just the sum of every high and every low?
 Remind me once again just who I am because I need to know.
 Ooh-oh
 You say I am loved when I can't feel a thing.
 You say I am strong when I think I am weak.
 And you say I am held when I am falling short.
 And when I don't belong, oh You say I am Yours.
 And I believe
 Oh, I believe
 What You say of me
 I believe.

The only thing that matters now is everything You think of me.
 In You I find my worth, in You I find my identity.
 Taking all I have, and now I'm laying it at Your feet.
 You have every failure, God, You have every victory.
 Ooh-oh
 You say I am loved when I can't feel a thing.

You say I am strong when I think I am weak.
You say I am held when I am falling short.
When I don't belong, oh You say I am Yours
And I believe
Oh, I believe
What You say of me
I believe.

Yes, there was hate here last night, but it was outside these walls,
and we were welcomed in.
And once here, we heard that we belong.
That we are held.
That we are loved.
And that is turning our world upside down.