

Text: Luke 19: 1-10
Title: Saving Zacchaeus
Date: 10.30.22
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If you're a parent of a particular vintage this story is part of the songbook that you sing to your children and grandchildren: *The Wheels on the Bus*, *Old McDonald had a Farm*, and *Zacchaeus was a Wee Little Man*....

Or, if you grew up with a children's illustrated Bible, this story conjures up cartoons of a bandy-legged and barrel-chested Zacchaeus bobbing on the fringes of a crowd or shinnying up a sycamore tree.

The song and the images are endearing and part of our cultural lexicon but what else is going on here? What might this delightful ancient story teach us about God and humanity and the living of these days?

Let's start with Zacchaeus.

To this gathering crowd, Zacchaeus was a turncoat. He cooperated with the Roman authorities to collect taxes – while taking a little off the top for himself. He was resented, reviled, and on this spring afternoon he was ignored. For while they had to pay taxes to this blustery-little-bloke they didn't have to be courteous to him – or welcome him into their parade. Because....

Because this crowd was probably a parade of Hebrews, numbering in the thousands, traveling down from Galilee, skirting the uncertainty of Samaria, and passing through the toll booth at Jericho, on their way to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem. This was an annual pilgrimage, the grand parade of a faith family, and there was no room for Zacchaeus....

But Jesus had raised the dead, driven out demons, healed the blind, turned water into wine, taught in the temple, fed thousands with just a few loaves of bread and a couple fish, and now he too was headed for Jerusalem....

So some thought this signaled he was the Messiah, some thought there would be a run-in with the authorities, and some thought he was just another carnival barker and charlatan. But whatever he was, Jesus was marching in the middle of a grand parade.

Of course, wee Zacchaeus couldn't see what the fuss was all about until he remembered the tree up the road. And it dawned on him that

if he beat the crowd there...
if he could get up in that tree...
if he....

Now. Dignified men didn't run. Men of his station in life strolled, they sauntered. But Zacchaeus hoisted up his tunic and ran down the road like a little school girl. It was ignoble, but he scooted up the tree, poked his head through the leaves, and proud as he could be for beating the ruckus, waited for Jesus.

Our text reads that Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus.

It doesn't say why. Curiosity? Worry? Wonder? Some deep human longing? The text reads that Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus, but it was Jesus who saw Zacchaeus.

Jesus paused under the shade of the sycamore tree and looked up, only to see a flushed-faced-fellow looking back at him. Jesus could tell he was a rich man – might have been those Gucci sandals dangling in the branches.

And maybe Jesus saw the humor in the moment, or maybe he saw Zacchaeus for who he really was – curious, crafty, rich, sinner – but as he peered up at this Publican perched in his leafy loft, Jesus announced his dinner plans:

Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.

Zacchaeus tumbled out of the tree.

He was no longer pushed to the margins.

He was now the center of attention.

He was grand marshal of this parade.

Now they couldn't ignore him.

Jesus would join him at his villa.

Jesus knew who he was.

Jesus was coming to his house for dinner!

The crowd was stunned. They'd heard that Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners, but that was urban legend, that was theoretical. This was unacceptable. Clearly Jesus was confused. This was no way for a messiah to act. Zacchaeus was a scoundrel. This was scandalous.

There's no record of their dinner conversation. There's no telling what they talked about or how Zacchaeus felt when Jesus looked him in the eyes.

But, at some point during dinner, in a moment of repentance, Zacchaeus stood up, jumped ahead to steps eight and nine of a Twelve Step Program, and announced that he would give half of his possessions to the poor and make reparations fourfold to those whom he had defrauded. Thanks be to God!

There's no record of their dinner conversation, but neither is there record if Zacchaeus followed through on his proclamation. There's no story about what he did the next morning or how he balanced the ledger. But, before Zacchaeus could sit down Jesus stood up and said,

Today salvation has come to this house...

Dear friends, just a few miles back-up the road and a few verses earlier Jesus tells a leper that his faith has saved him. You may remember the story....

Ten lepers cried out to be healed. The nine Jewish lepers did as they were told and went to the priests to confirm their healing, but the one Samaritan leper came back to thank Jesus. And Jesus said to him,

Your faith has made you well.

The word here for “made well” has the same root as the “salvation” that Jesus announced to the house of Zacchaeus. As resident philosopher and Greek scholar, Aron Reppmann, puts it:

Both passages are drawing on the same family of words. The verb “sesoken” (made well) in Luke 17:19 and the noun “soteria” (salvation) in Luke 19:9 both come from the root verb “sodzo” meaning: save, bring safely, restore, physically heal, deliver from enemies.

And that is to say that salvation here is not the contemporary type, where our souls get whisked away to heaven, but salvation of a biblical sort. Not salvation where believing is the yard stick but salvation where things are made whole and straight and healthy. Salvation where justice and mercy embrace. Salvation where people flourish in right relationship. Salvation where *shalom* is restored. Salvation where bodies are healed and corrupt economic systems are made right.

Today salvation has come to this house....

The story of Zacchaeus is a picture of salvation – a picture of repentance and the righting of relationship. Who knows what it means when Zacchaeus dies, that doesn’t seem to be the point, but the point seems to be who he was in his living. He was restored to who he was created to be:

not an exploiter but a servant,
not an outsider but one of the family,
not hanging on a limb but seated at the table,
not a taker but a giver.
not lost but found.

Dear friends, this quaint story isn’t about a spiritual seeker who was savvy enough to see Jesus, as much as it is a snapshot of salvation where things are made right....

That’s not to suggest that Zacchaeus is saved because of what he did; but it is to suggest that salvation has to do with a crooked world being made straight. And everybody is in on it; from the Samaritan leper, to Lazarus at the gate, to the proud Pharisee, to the short rich guy.

The story of Zacchaeus is also illuminating because the embrace of Jesus isn't limited to the poor and the tossed aside, but extends to the crooked rich as well.

We expect Jesus to visit mercy on those who need mercy, but for the powerful and the proud the tables are supposed to turn. For the ones who have the game rigged in their favor there's supposed to be a coming reversal. And yet, here is Jesus proclaiming salvation to one who was rich, reviled, and resented.

Rich or poor, short or tall, crooked or straight, sinner or saint, insider or outsider, religious or rebellious it seems the only qualification that matters to be embraced by Jesus is to be human. In the word of Paul Tillich:

*You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you...
Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything.
Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!*

Zacchaeus was one of the first to get it, and to use an image that Howard Thurman offered, Jesus set a crown over Zacchaeus that he would spend the rest of his life gladly growing tall enough to wear.

Dear friends,

whether you're bobbing on the edges or marching in the middle,
whether you're a beggar at the gate or you live in a gated community,
whether you're short of change or tall in trespass,
whether you're full of faith or struggling with cynicism,
whether you're Republican or Democrat,
whether you're old and crusty or a fresh faced 10-year-old,
you are loved and accepted by God in Christ.
Salvation has visited your house.

For the Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost.

Thanks be to God!

Let us respond with repentance and right relationship.

Amen.