

24<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Year C)

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*Luke 19:1-10*

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

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It has come to my attention that there are some of you that are unaware that there is a very old children's song about today's very passage. Therefore, I have decided to perform it here for you today. Enjoy.

*Zacchaeus was a wee little man,  
and a wee little man was he.  
He climbed up in a sycamore tree  
for the Lord he wanted to see.*

*And when the Savior passed that way  
he looked up in the tree.  
And said, "Zacchaeus, you come down!  
For I'm going to your house today!  
For I'm going to your house today!*

*Zacchaeus was a wee little man,  
but a happy man was he,  
For he had seen the Lord that day  
and a happy man was he;  
and a very happy man was he!*

Thanks to the Revised Common Lectionary, this is the second Sunday in a row that we have journeyed with tax-collectors. In case you weren't with us last week, allow me to recap for you our story. Two men prayed in a temple. One was a very self-absorbed, self-righteous, holier-than-thou pharisee who thanked God that he was not like those "other people" he did not like. He placed himself on a very high pedestal reminding God that he fasted weekly and tithed ten percent of his income.

Off in the corner, was a lowly tax-collector, who merely beat his breast and said, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner!"

Jesus told us that the tax-collector went home justified because those who humble themselves will be exalted and those who exalt themselves will be humbled.

We ended the sermon by talking about how we should all follow the example of the tax-collector and be 100% clear that we are *all* sinners in need of God's redemption. God's salvation comes to us through no merit of our own but simply because of God's steadfast mercy. Therefore, the giving of our financial blessings should be a joyful act of returning a portion of that which has been given to us through God's mercy.

This morning, we are gifted with yet another story of another tax-collector. This tax-collector has a name: Zacchaeus. There are a couple things that the Gospel writer tells us before we begin our story to help us set the stage for what is to come.

First of all, he is a tax-collector. And furthermore, he is not only *a* tax-collector; he is *the chief* tax-collector. What this means is that he probably had a host of tax-collectors working underneath him. A perfect pyramid scheme, Zacchaeus was at the top of the pyramid - well, almost, the Romans were the only ones at the top. However, the further you were to the top, the more people had to pay tribute to you underneath. Therefore, any tax-collector had to collect enough taxes to do three things: 1) appease the government, 2) satisfy the people they worked for between them and the Romans (like Zacchaeus), and 3) keep enough to live off of themselves.

Therefore, to say that Zacchaeus was rich, as this passage does explicitly, is probably a bit redundant. As a chief tax-collector, the fact that he was rich went without saying. However, Luke wishes to remind us just in case we fail to see the obvious.

The second thing that we are told as Luke is setting the stage is that Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus. He must have heard of his stories. He must have heard of his miraculous abilities to heal lepers, blind people, and other disabled folks. But what *really* sparked his interest was the fact that he had heard that this Jesus person actually went out of his way to seek out people *like him*; people like him that no other people wanted to hang out with.

You see, as a tax-collector, no one really wanted to hang out with him. Any time he went knocking on people's doors, it was not to enter and have a friendly meal with them. It was not to sit on the couch and open a bottle of wine and enjoy each other's company. Rather, when he went knocking on people's doors, it was to squeeze them of as much dough as possible so he could add to his growing stack of money.

Yet, here was a person that was seeking out people like tax-collectors. Curiosity had gotten the better of Zacchaeus and he just *had* to see what this man was all about.

Now, the third piece of information that Luke reveals to us uncovers a problem with Zacchaeus' plan: he's short. Anyone who is "vertically challenged" knows the pain of being in a crowd and trying to see someone who is not elevated. Zacchaeus knew this feeling.

Therefore, Zacchaeus climbs the sycamore tree and gets a glimpse of Jesus.

Yesterday, it occurred to me that this part of the story, the part where Zacchaeus is craning his neck while perched precariously upon the branches of the sycamore tree, that this part might just be one of the most relevant parts of this passage today.

Who among us does not know what it is like to desperately seek Jesus? How many of us have craned our necks looking for some glimpse of hope in a bleak landscape? Who among us does not know what it is like to seek some sign of newness, some beacon of change when all else seems to be heading to hell in a hand basket?

What was it that Zacchaeus was expecting to see? What was it that Zacchaeus expected Jesus to do? We don't know the answers to these questions. Perhaps Zacchaeus himself could not have answered these questions if you had the chance to ask him yourself. He was just curious. He was just hopeful for *something*. So he climbed the tree and waited.

Jesus passed by and looked up in the tree. I suppose it was not everyday that Jesus saw a fully grown man perched in a tree. Jesus looked up to him and said, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today!"

Zacchaeus scurried down from the tree as everyone gasped. Several thoughts popped into the witnesses' heads. First of all, how did he know this man's name? Most of the people themselves did not know his name; they didn't think he was worth the time it took to even ask for it. They simply referred to him as that blood-sucking you-know-what who has come again to rip us off. Yet, this Jesus knew his name and called him by name. His name was Zacchaeus. A couple of people chuckled as Zacchaeus came down from the tree. You know why? Because "Zacchaeus" was a Hebrew name that literally meant "clean" or "pure." An ironic name indeed for a tax-collector.

The second thing the observers were wondering about what why in God's name Jesus invite himself over to this tax-collector's house. First of all, it was a major breach of etiquette to invite yourself over to someone's house, and especially to do so to a person whom you have never even met. Secondly, it didn't make sense that Jesus would want to "lower" himself to eat at a table with the likes of Zacchaeus. As a result of these beliefs, I can imagine that several people in the crowd stomped away in disgust at the "injustice" of it all.

Yet, Zacchaeus pays them no mind. He gets to the ground and dusts off his clothes and looks up to Jesus, perhaps still a little out of breath from all of the climbing. Jesus opens his mouth to say something but he doesn't get the chance. Zacchaeus beats him to the punch. He stands before Jesus and tells him that he will give half of all of his possessions to the poor. And, what's more, he promises to pay back four times the amount to everyone whom he has wronged.

At this point, I like to imagine Jesus saying something like this now that he can get a word in: "You know, I was just going to ask if I could bring a salad or something, but that's great, too!"

But what the text does tell us is that Jesus says to Zacchaeus (and probably more to the surrounding crowd) that "today salvation has come to this house."

Now, in my mind, there are two ways to interpret this statement. The first is to say that salvation came to Zacchaeus because of his generosity. The second is to say that Zacchaeus' generosity was a response to salvation, namely in the form of Jesus welcoming him, a sinner, in the first place. The first interpretation, the one that says that salvation came to Zacchaeus because of his generosity, is heretical. It goes by the name of pelagianism. If you participated in the "Christian Doctrine" class a few months ago, this should sound familiar. Pelagianism states that we are saved by the good works we do. According to pelagianism, Zacchaeus was given salvation as a result of his generous offer to donate half of his wealth to the poor and pay back four-fold those he had wronged.

However, we do not believe this. We do not believe that God is some magic vending machine where if we insert “x” amount of good works then we receive “x” amount of salvation. It just doesn’t work that way.

Instead, as reformed Christians, we believe living as generous and faithful disciples of Jesus should be done not out of a self-absorbed stance of trying to secure our salvation, but rather as a joyful response to the salvation that *has already been secured on our behalf by Jesus Christ*.

This interpretation sees today’s passage as thus: Zachhaeus was transformed by the very presence of Jesus. Zacchaeus was so overwhelmed that Jesus would want to dine with him that something within him changed or, perhaps more accurately, something that always resided within him was finally uncovered and set free. Zacchaeus has no choice but to exude generosity because Jesus saw something in him that no one else, and indeed even himself, had seen.

And that is what we celebrate every stewardship season. We celebrate that we have no choice but to reciprocate Jesus’ generosity with our own. We invest in the kingdom of heaven not just with our time and our talents, but with our money. We do this because we have encountered Jesus. We do this because Jesus has sought us out. We all know what it is like to be alone up on a sycamore branch, apart from everyone else, just hoping to get a glimpse of Jesus. Well, he has found us. As so we respond with generosity as Zacchaeus did.

And the end of the day, this passage is really about encountering Jesus and being transformed by it. And friends, that is a good reminder for us this day as a church that has been ministering to and with the people of Shelter Island for almost 275 years. And that reminder is this: “the mark of an effective church is not how many people come but how many people who live differently as a result of having been there.”<sup>1</sup> That’s right, what makes us an effective church is not how many come to our worship services. What makes us an effective church is not even how much money we raise every stewardship season. What makes us an effective church is how many people’s lives have been transformed as a result of being with us and us being with them. *That* is why we pledge our money and give generously as Zacchaeus did; because this church has transformed lives through the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ.

So together, let us come down from our sycamore trees and respond to Jesus’ invitation. Let us give generously because God has sought us out. Let us leap with joy because Jesus is coming to this house today and a celebration is in order!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Can’t take credit for this statement. Author unknown. A popular Facebook “meme”