

“Found by God’s Grace”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Luke 19: 1-10

Let’s face it – this famous story from Luke is one of our favorites. We’ve heard it told since we were children, how “Zacchaeus was a wee little man” who climbed the tree to see Jesus come into Jericho. Perhaps you acted it out as a child in Sunday School. All the tall kids stood in a line, with the shortest child jumping up and down behind them. Jesus walked in, with his disciples, and when Zacchaeus couldn’t see him, he climbed up on a chair or a table, and then had a clear view.

That’s usually as far as we go with the story, because the primary thing we remember about Zacchaeus is that he was short. The poor guy was probably the butt of many jokes around town because of his small stature. But despite his lack of height, he showed that grit and determination us Americans can get excited about, not letting it stand in his way to see the Lord. He found a sycamore tree, scaled it, and assumed his perch like a bird. No matter what, he would overcome any obstacles to see this man who many were calling the Messiah.

And Jesus does not disappoint us with his choosing of the underdog. He spots Zacchaeus up in that tree, calls him down, and tells him he wants to come to his house for dinner. With this, Zacchaeus is overwhelmed with joy, and treats the master with a meal worthy of a king. This is probably the portrait that comes to mind when we hear this story from Luke. It’s a story about God’s grace shown to those who are underprivileged or not blessed with the greatest physical attributes. But in all honesty, there’s much, much more to this story than a short man who Jesus notices and has dinner with. It’s truly a story about being found – and changed - by God’s grace.

To begin with, this story is only found in the Gospel of Luke. The Gospel writer uses the term “chief tax collector” to describe Zacchaeus, a term that is not found in the rest of the New Testament. As the chief tax collector, Zacchaeus would have been in control of the Roman taxation system for that region, a very corrupt organization within the Roman Empire. The city of Jericho was a major center of commerce, with several trading routes extending eastward. Very likely, Zacchaeus had a great deal of power and influence over the economic activity in the city.

To further complicate matters, Zacchaeus was a Jew. There is a good chance that he or one of his associates had cheated almost everyone who was in the crowd that day. And because he was a fellow Jew, most of the crowd no doubt felt like he had betrayed them by his

involvement in the Roman government. I suppose it's not surprising that Zacchaeus would find a tree to climb: not only so he could see Jesus, but also so that no one would see him!

Zacchaeus was not an upright individual in his native Jericho. He was disliked, even despised, by those in his community. Sure, he was a short man who we like to feel sympathy for every time we read this story. The reality, though, is that he was not only looked down upon because he was short, but primarily because he had turned on his fellow Jewish brothers and sisters by taxing them mercilessly. It's no real surprise that the crowd reacted the way it did: "All who saw it began to grumble and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner'" (19:7). And can you really blame them?

Put yourself in the place of the crowd that day. You've been standing in the hot sun for hours, hoping to see this great man Jesus who everyone's been talking about. Then, when he does come, he stops and takes notice of the short, despicable cheat way up in a tree - and ignores all of you honest folks in the crowd. And then, Jesus has the nerve to want to go have a meal at Zacchaeus's house. What kind of Messiah is this? How can he invite himself into the life of a "sinner" like that, and not invite one of us? Why him and not me?

We ask that question all the time, don't we? We're driving along the freeway, people flying by us, going at least 10 miles per hour over the speed limit. We decide it's safe to speed up a little. And then we're the one who gets pulled over by the highway patrol. What about all those other sinners? Why don't they get a ticket?

We may ask that question in the car, or we may ask it in a hospital waiting room. Your baby is born with serious developmental problems, while the next couple over has a healthy child born to them. You are laid off from your work of twenty-five faithful years, while the person with the same amount of experience as you is promoted. You're struggling to make it through the next day without your spouse or loved one with you, while your neighbors are celebrating their fiftieth wedding anniversary. Why him and not me?

It's when we face that question and wrestle with it that we have to face the radical nature of Luke's Gospel. In a story that precedes Zacchaeus in Luke, a young rich ruler is told that to inherit eternal life, he must sell all his earthly possessions and distribute all the proceeds to the poor. This caused much sadness in the man, and he couldn't go through with it. Jesus proclaimed, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (18:18-25).

And then, Jesus enters Jericho and states that a rich man, in the form of Zacchaeus, will enter the heavenly kingdom. The difference is that this rich ruler is unhappy with his lot in life. He seeks a change in his lifestyle. He seeks out Jesus to help him make this change. And

finally, through Jesus' commandment, he distances himself from those rich possessions, turning them over to those who are in need. As one commentator puts it, "Zacchaeus's response to Jesus illustrates that the miracle can occur, that the wealthy can gain freedom, from possessions that possess them, just as the blind came to see, the lame to walk, the demon-possessed to be restored, and the dead to be made alive"

(Gaventa, Texts for Preaching: Year C, 583).

The miracle in this story is not that the cheat is brought to justice. The miracle in this story is that a sinner who was lost has been found by God's grace. And not only found, but reoriented towards God's purposes for his life. That is the embodiment of repentance: re-turning to God. And in the example of Zacchaeus, we must force ourselves to look beyond his height, and recognize that all of us are called to reorient ourselves to God, since we have all been found by God's grace.

Willie Francois writes: Zacchaeus's name can be translated as "Justice." Being a tax collector makes it hard for him to live up to this name. But when he encounters Jesus, he has the chance to live up to it despite the conflict presented by his context. Justice meets Jesus. There is something revolutionarily organic about such a meeting . . .

To prove himself, Zacchaeus declares that he will abandon the resources that fortify his identity as a wealthy tax collector. He says this in the present tense: "I give to the poor" and "I give back fourfold." He is changed already, articulating not a future promise but something that has already begun. He even exceeds the law of restitution by indicating his repayment of four times what he extorted from his victims. When you embrace your divine identity, you are defined beyond your inventory, infractions, and insecurities.

Authentic grace is not the power to purchase. It is the stamina for sacrifice. Jesus offers Zacchaeus a way to shift the narrative of his life. Zacchaeus responds by creating a new story, a counternarrative to the berating of the shortsighted crowd. There are moments in life when God gives you the opportunity to go public with your transformation. God gives you a chance to stand your ground (Willie Dwayne Francois III, The Christian Century, October 12, 2016: 21).

In GriefShare this week, we talked about our identity as children of God. As human beings, we identify ourselves by material things: what we own, where we live, how our possessions compare to what others have or do not have. We put our trust in "the power to purchase," and seem to forget the truth that is revealed in the Book of Job: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there" (Job 1:21).

But this truth about our identity is also applicable to our identity as it's formed through human relationships. We are known as daughter or son, sister or brother, husband or wife, friend or coworker. We believe that our "divine identity" is fundamentally rooted in these

relationships, which is why, when our loved ones die, we struggle in grief to comprehend why God would take them from us. But, once again, the words of Job are applicable: “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there” (Job 1:21).

There is a difference between “ownership” and “stewardship.” The world tells us we own things, that our identity is rooted in those possessions. We can be seduced into thinking that we also “own” our loved ones – that we somehow have earned the right to possess them.

But what Zacchaeus came to realize, what Job came to realize, and what we are called by faith to realize, is that all that we have – money, possessions, even the people in our lives – are solely given to us through the unmerited grace of God. We have done nothing to earn them. When we come to embrace that truth of our identity as children of God, then we no longer see things in terms of ownership, but rather in terms of stewardship. We are stewards of these beautiful, bountiful, incredible gifts God has bestowed on us. And while we are on this earth, we have been empowered to give generously and sacrificially, to return to God what God has first given to us, and to nurture and never take for granted the people who are such an integral part of our lives. For as Job also proclaims: “The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21).

Thank God Jesus looked up in that tree and invited himself over to the house of the sinner for dinner. Because in doing so, he reminded all of us that we are the lost of this world, who are called to reorient our lives to the will of our living, loving God.

“Today salvation has come to this house – for the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost” (19:9-10).

Thanks be to God. Amen.