



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Zacchaeus”

Luke 19:1-10

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Luke 19:1-10. [Jesus] entered Jericho and was passing through it. ²A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax-collector and was rich. ³He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. ⁴So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. ⁵When 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.’ ⁶So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. ⁷All who saw it began to grumble and said, ‘He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.’ ⁸Zacchaeus 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.’ ⁹Then Jesus said to him, ‘Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.’

Last weekend, we were on a family trip to Colonial Williamsburg. Everywhere are these signs that read, “Please do not climb the trees.” And every few trees or so, we had to remind our daughter to get off the gnarly roots and to quit trying to reach the branches. Parents the whole town over were reminding their kids not to take foothold on trunks or swing from ancient, low-hanging branches.

It’s a completely normal thing for a child to want to climb a tree. At any other place, we’d think nothing of it and let them climb on. I bet most of us scaled a good tree or two in our day. But I dare say we’d all do a double take if we were to walk outside and see a grown man climbing up one.



What would we think to see an adult in his work clothes scrambling up a tree trunk and out onto the limbs?

Luke tells us that Zacchaeus was a short man. Depending on how you translate the Greek word for “stature,” this could mean that Zacchaeus was physically small, or it could mean that he was ... immature.ⁱ So, whether a “wee little man,” as the song goes, or a man of diminished character—he couldn’t see over the crowd. Perhaps the heads in front of him were too tall, or his neighbors simply wouldn’t give an inch to let someone like him in.

His name “Zacchaeus” means “innocent” or “pure,” which seems ironic given who the man is. Luke goes to some length to describe him as the sort of person that we love to hate. The gospel writer says that Zacchaeus was “a chief tax collector.” This designates him as special class of sinners to his fellow Judeans—he worked for the empire, the Roman occupiers. These chief tax collectors got rich by impoverishing others, and, not only that, they were also known to send troops to invade homes of their neighbors who were allegedly withholding unreported goods. Presumably, Zacchaeus and his cronies invaded the homes of common people and plundered them; the more goods they could tax, the richer they would become.ⁱⁱ That was Zacchaeus’ goal, and he reached it. He “was rich,” says Luke.

If this story were told in WWII Europe, Zacchaeus would have the star of David on his shoulder, for he is Jewish, but he’d be keeping books for the Nazi soldiers and lining his pockets with the possessions of his neighbors. He’s the character in the book or film we love to see get his just dessert in the end.

But, of course, that’s not what happens.

The other week, our daughter Eleanor and I were at the pharmacy. She wanted a treat—you know, b/c they put all the candy and flashy toys right at a kids’ eye level (gee, thanks, CVS). Somehow, I convinced Eleanor that the exciting thing to do would be to pick out a new toothbrush. (She needed one anyway.) We looked through the selection. This is no quick decision for a 4-year-old. She passed over Elsa and Anna, then “Baby Shark” and “Paw Patrol.” She passed over the very best Disney and Pixar had to offer. What she ultimately chose was, by her description, the scariest toothbrush on the rack —after all, it *IS* almost Halloween. (Brace yourselves. Are you ready for the scariest toothbrush on the rack at CVS?) Eleanor chose: the Grinch. Because, in her words, “He’s a REAL bad guy!”

Well, he is a bad guy. And as I kept working on the story of Zacchaeus this week, I kept coming back to Dr. Seuss’ fuzzy green character. As the song goes:



*You're a mean one, Mr. Grinch
You really are a heel
You're as cuddly as a cactus
And as charming as an eel, Mr. Grinch
You're a bad banana with a greasy black peel*

*Just face the music, you're a monster, Mr. Grinch, yes, you are
Your heart's an empty hole
Your brain is full of spiders
You've got garlic in your soul, Mr. Grinch
I wouldn't touch you with a thirty-nine-and-a-half foot pole.ⁱⁱⁱ*

Worst of all, Mr. Grinch hates Christmas. And he tries to ruin Christmas for everyone in Whoville.

If you've paid attention to Christmas music or Christmas stories or Christmas movies at all since the 1960's, then you know how the story ends. The Grinch does all he can to ruin Christmas for everyone in Whoville, but when love and Christmas spirit is extended his way (despite what I would argue are his very arrestable offenses!), his ice-cold heart is melted and grows three sizes.

He *was* a mean one, that Mr. Grinch. But something, someone interrupted his course of destruction. Someone didn't offer him the justice he deserved. Someone offered him exactly what he didn't deserve—grace.

Zacchaeus, hated by his neighbors (probably for very good reason) is up in that tree. The man from Nazareth looks up into the branches at this man from Jericho and he orders him to come down. "Hurry and come down," he says, "for I must stay at your house today." So, Zacchaeus tumbles down from his perch in the tree and he happily welcomes Jesus into his house.

This invitation, this encounter, is about Jesus' initiative. Up until this moment, Zacchaeus has not uttered a single a word.

Often, at least this is true for me, we hear the Zacchaeus story as a tale of repentance. Repent and be forgiven. It's the rhythm we follow in worship week after week, it's the way other passages in Scripture often present the order—repent and you shall be forgiven. But here in Luke—here with Zacchaeus, what we see is zero repentance until Jesus forgives him. Forgiveness, acceptance is a



movement Jesus makes toward Zacchaeus. And the result, the result of this movement of grace on Jesus' behalf is transformation, true forgiveness.

What do we do when someone calls us out for our wrongs? As children, what is our response? To deny. To defend. To hide. When you're afraid of judgment, you hide. It is when you know that you are forgiven, however, that you can truly be honest. Only when you are forgiven can you truly repent. It sounds backwards, doesn't it? How different a thing it is to know that the grace is already yours, that forgiveness has already been granted.

Were we to place ourselves in Luke's scene, I wager that many of us (myself included) would be among the neighbors grumbling at Jesus going to spend time with this sinner, our gosh awful neighbor. I follow the rules. I can sympathize with the grumblers. We hate when people get away with things. We hate when others don't get the full weight of the law down on them. We only like grace when it comes to us.

The good news, of course, is that it does come to us. Grace *does* come to us, and that is what enables *us* to forgive.

The passage tells us that Zacchaeus welcomed Jesus into his home. And then we have a line that reveals the truth about who Zacchaeus is deep inside—the part of him that only Jesus could see. “Look,” he says, “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.”

Jesus' response to Zacchaeus is no lecture. He doesn't shame him or wag his finger in his face. Jesus' response to Zacchaeus is grace. And Zacchaeus' response reveals to us that he already knows what he is doing is wrong. He is changed, he repents *because* he is loved, *because* he is forgiven.

We are reminded that the kingdom is an upside-down sort of kingdom. Grace is given, real repentance is shared. The grace here precedes repentance. It seems backwards. This isn't how the world works today, is it? If there is some selfish, rich, powerful person or neighbor today we love to hate, the only way we'll trust them is if that person gives it all away, and then *maybe* we'll think about forgiving them. We have to see the person say “sorry” enough times, and then *maybe* we'll change our opinion. That's the way forgiveness works in this world.

But in God's Kingdom, Jesus forgives first. And the salvation Jesus promises not just in heaven, it's not just some future glory for the next life. The salvation Jesus promises is now. The salvation Jesus promises is here. Somehow, Jesus makes Zacchaeus innocent and pure—like his



name. Jesus heals Zacchaeus in a way he didn't know he needed healing. It is as though Zacchaeus were born again, a child worthy of the name he carries.

Jesus is once again turning our world upside down. He doesn't see Zacchaeus the ways his neighbors saw him. Jesus doesn't see you the ways your neighbors see you—or, for that matter, the ways you even see yourself. Jesus sees deeper than that. Jesus sees who and what you truly are—your deepest self, who God made and called you to be.

Luke gives us in this story one of the great names for Jesus, “the one who came to seek out and save the lost.” Jesus has not come to call the worthy. Jesus has not come to call those that think they have it all together. Jesus has come to seek out and save the lost. That's us—that's you and me, today or sometime or another in our lives. We are lost, and in Jesus we are found.

The beauty and the grace of this Good News is that Jesus continues to come. That is how salvation works. We do not have to put our house in order first. We do not have to get it all together. The beauty and grace is that by the work of the Spirit, Jesus continues to come to us, as guest among sinners.

Thanks be to God.

ⁱ Vitor Westhelle, “Exposing Zacchaeus,” *The Christian Century* (Oct 31, 2006), p. 28.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ Albert Hague and Theodor S. Geisel, “You're a Mean One, Mr. Grinch,” 1966.

