

## PROPER 26, PENTECOST 21, YEAR C, OCTOBER 30, 2022

How many of you remember hearing the story of Zacchaeus in Sunday School and learning that song that went.

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

I think, if we grew up in the church, that song is embedded in our memory banks so that when we hear the story of Zacchaeus we automatically classify it as a children's story that is cute and funny and not really relatable to adults. In fact, when I looked for images for the bulletin today most of them were for children's Church school and for coloring. But this story has a lot to say to us adults.

One of the "cute" elements we hear in this story is that Zacchaeus is short and because of his limited height he is desperate to see Jesus and so he runs ahead of the crowd and finds a sycamore tree to climb to get a better view. How many of us recall being hoisted up by a parent to get a better view of a parade that is going by. Perhaps you did it for your own children. It doesn't stop in childhood either. How many of us have gone to a concert and try to push our way closer to the stage because we are desperate to get a better view of the "star" of the show?

A friend of mine recently recounted a story about the late Loretta Lynn. His parents had taken him when he was about 3 years old to her show and his father had placed him on his shoulder so he could see better. Loretta Lynn saw this chubby little boy on his dad's shoulders and came down and took his hand and brought him up on the stage. Her comment to him was, "Now what do you think of this view"?

In many respects that is what this story is all about. It's about how and what we see and once we've been exposed to the view can we change our view and what do we do about it. Zacchaeus's story is all about accepting the smallness of our vision.

Zacchaeus, first and foremost, was a tax collector. I mentioned last week how tax collectors were despised because they collected taxes from their Roman oppressors. Luke describes him as the sort of person that we love to hate. He says that Zacchaeus was a "chief tax collector," so, he was not only a traitor to the political cause of the Jews but was seen as a robber.

Luke also says that Zacchaeus was wealthy. That's no surprise because tax collectors got wealthy by extortion and embezzlement; taking advantage of the elderly; exploiting the working poor, and by taking care of his cronies. There's an unspoken assumption that Zacchaeus is as corrupt as the come and deserves nothing but disdain.

This is how the people of Jesus' day saw Zacchaeus. He was despicable and when Jesus acknowledges him and invites himself to Zacchaeus' home the people are indignant. They start grumbling "What business does Jesus have getting cozy with a sinner?" They can't see any redeeming qualities in him.

Have you ever held a person hostage to a version of themselves they're trying to outgrow? Have you ever refused a person the permission to change, knowing that if they change, you'll have to change, too? Our book club just read a book titled The Book Woman of Troublesome Creek. The story takes place in Appalachia in the 1930's and is about some people in the hills of Tennessee whose skin is blue and they really did exist.

Their skin is blue due to a recessive gene that resulted in an oxygen deficiency in the blood cells which made the skin turn blue. These people were ridiculed, feared and despised by the local people. The stories main character, a woman, is approached by a local doctor who convinces her to be tested to find out why her skin is blue. When they make the discovery, he offers her some medicine that would change her skin white. She took it and her skin turned white but, if anything, the people, treated her worse out of fear and an unwillingness to see her as anything but blue. Who was she to believe she was white. So, in a way this is what the crowd is doing to Zacchaeus. They only see Zacchaeus as a scoundrel and they don't want their opinion of him changed.

Zacchaeus stood his ground before their grumbling, saying, "Master, I will give away half my income to the poor — and if I'm caught cheating, I will pay four times the damages." This statement has been translated and interpreted two different ways which gives us two different meanings and it hinges on one particular verb that in the Greek text is in the present tense. To be perfectly honest there is no one correct answer. Some translations, like the one we read this morning, says that he will give half of his possessions to the poor, and that he'll repay fourfold all the people that he's cheated. What this implies is he acknowledges that he is a sinner who is converted and repents on the spot. He promises future reparations as he makes a new start.

However, other translations say, "Lord, I give half of my wealth to the poor, and whenever I discover any fraud or discrepancy, I always make a fourfold restitution." This implies that he is already giving his wealth away and making restitution to those who felt they have been mistreated. In this interpretation, Zacchaeus is not as corrupt as everyone paints him to be. So, was Zacchaeus a good man wrongly vilified or a villain who finally made good? I think this second interpretation fits better as it fits with the many times that Jesus calls out good people who are bad and commends bad people who are good.

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. It is, instead, all the "good" people who shunned Zacchaeus and made assumptions about him, who need to repent. It is the "good" people who judged him on the basis of what he was rather than for who he was. If Zacchaeus is innocent, if the outsider is actually the one on the inside, if the tax collector is the true son of Abraham, then all these people who thought they were on the inside, all these good folks who thought they knew the score, have to face the fact that they are profoundly mistaken.

By giving Zacchaeus a voice, Jesus has turned their whole world inside out. By standing in solidarity with the one who was scorned, Jesus has redrawn all the boundary lines. The irony is that the despicable Zacchaeus is the generous one. He's the one giving away half his wealth. Another irony is Zacchaeus' name means righteous and when you use the second interpretation he actually lives up to his name.

My friend, The Rev. Elizabeth Kaeton said, "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 about how we treat one another one way or another. Like the crowd murmuring about Zacchaeus, it is easy to be blinded by our prejudice of 'those people' and find ourselves accusing the very person or people we should be emulating."

Zacchaeus's story emphasizes the smallness of our vision in how we see others. It's about the courage it takes to recognize who and what we really are in relation to God as well as how we see others.

The question is whether the ones who really need it will realize it and will humble themselves enough to repent, step over the line, embrace the other who is and has always been their brother and sister. But that's a big, old, open question. It was back then. It is right now.

Father Richard Rohr puts it this way. "When any church defines itself by exclusion of anybody, it is always wrong. It is avoiding its only vocation, which is to be the Christ. The only groups that Jesus seriously critiques are those who include themselves and exclude others from the always-given grace of God.

The Church is always converted when the outcasts are re-invited back into the fold. You see this when Jesus' sends marginalized people that he has healed back into the village, back to their family, or back to the temple to "show themselves to the priests." It is not just for their re-inclusion and acceptance, but actually for the group itself to be renewed by including them into the fold.

I firmly believe that our redemption is inextricably bound up in our relationships to one another, because I believe that's how we love others, especially the other - whoever that is for you – how we love the other is how we love God. And in the end, that's all that matters. Amen.