

Luke 18:31-19:10

Travelling with Jesus these past few weeks has taken us into hostile territory and desperate situations - the road to Jericho, lament over Jerusalem, search-and-rescue missions, great chasms and now the wee Zacchaeus.

Taken one by one, each is a facet of the Jesus perspective. Taken as a whole, these stories challenge the prevailing religious order and defy the established social structures, not just of those old long ago days, but of our days as well.

Jesus told his disciples what would happen once they got to Jerusalem, as he speaks of himself in the third person: “the Son of Man will be handed over to the Gentiles. He will be mocked, insulted, spat upon, and flogged. They will kill him, and on the third day he will rise again.” But the disciples understood nothing of what Jesus said – and it’s not the first time.

The people we’ve met in Luke’s gospel weren’t believers because of a Jesus who “died for their sins.” They encountered a Jesus who lived to free them from anything and everything that made them less than human, that diminished them, that kept them in a cocoon of mind-numbing and heart-stopping stasis where every day started with the question, “Really, is this all there is?” They encountered a Jesus who brought them to life.

Jesus is intent on reaching Jerusalem, but there will be two interruptions before he gets there – a blind beggar and a rich chief tax collector. “Jesus, Son of

David, have mercy on me!" Twice, a blind beggar cries out, even though people tell him to shut up. "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asks the blind man. "Lord, let me see again." Could the man be speaking also for the disciples who still don't understand, who still can't see? Could the man be speaking for us? "Receive your sight," Jesus said, and it was so.

Throughout the gospel of Luke, Jesus seems to be passing by at just the right time for people. Just when a man is twisted by demons, Jesus the exorcist passes by. Just as men are involved in the daily grind of making a living, Jesus passes by and calls them to follow him. Just as a centurion's servant falls ill, Jesus happens to be in town. Just as we are involved in judging someone else or being judged ourselves, Jesus walking by and overhearing, breaks into the circle. Just as someone reaches the end of her suffering rope, after years of struggle, Jesus happens to be moving down the street.

Just when we are feeling we haven't achieved enough prestige in our lives compared to others, Jesus comes along with a word of correction. Just when we realize we don't really know how to pray, the teacher who does happens to be praying a stone's throw away. At exactly the moment we are brimming over with fears, the Saviour utters his anti-anxiety instructions.

Just when someone thinks they are beyond the notice and reach of a loving, forgiving God, Jesus the Good Shepherd, the Forgiving Parent, sets out on his search. Right when we are mired in guilt or smothered by our possessions, Jesus

comes along. And just when a short, insecure hated tax collector is looking for meaning in his life, guess who is passing through Jericho? And now we come to the encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus.

And so when Jesus calls Zacchaeus, the rich chief tax collector, out of the tree, we know by now something transformative is going to happen. It's, what we've come to expect. We've seen crowds gather around for healings; we have listened in while religious experts question him; we have watched outcasts and sinners drawn to his presence. Yet, we don't know what happens to any of these people after Jesus moves on. We can only wonder. Were their lives, which were changed in the moment by his presence, altered forever? Or did ordinary, everyday life eventually erode the raw brilliance of that encounter to a faded and distant memory-tinged sepia by regret that it didn't bring sweeping change, to that person or to the world?

Today we find out how a wee little life – is forever changed. Zacchaeus was an agent of the state. "Somebody has to collect taxes," he told himself, "If I don't do it, somebody else will – if I quit, it won't make taxes go away." He still had that conversation with himself almost every morning. He knew people despised him, but he also knew that more than a few would take his place if given the chance. Work, even unpleasant work, was better than no work. And so it went day by day.

Zacchaeus longed for something more. He didn't talk about it with anybody, but he knew that making a living wasn't the same as making a life. Then one ordinary day, he heard shouting in the street. "Jesus of Nazareth is here in Jericho.

A few days earlier, Zacchaeus had overheard somebody say, “Jesus of Nazareth? Yeah, I’ve heard of him, but I’d stay clear. He’s a friend of tax collectors and sinners.” Now, what if it were actually true?

Though he usually tried to avoid crowds, Zacchaeus wanted to see this Jesus of Nazareth. But people were already standing three-deep along the road. Then he saw the sycamore tree he used to climb as a child. He didn’t care who stared or laughed. He hooked his legs around the bottom branch and hoisted himself up. He felt like he could see all the way to Jerusalem. He’d tell his family, “I saw Jesus, today – you know, the prophet everyone’s been talking about. He was so close I could have touched him.”

Just then, Jesus stopped and looked up. It was probably a second, but, it could have been a lifetime, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” Some things you can never explain. Zacchaeus couldn’t explain why he climbed up in the sycamore tree or why he came – or how Jesus knew his name. That day changed his life in radical ways.

The story of Zacchaeus occurs only in Luke’s Gospel. The name Zacchaeus means “righteous” or “pure,” or “holy one.” Yet, most folks would have thought the chief tax collector to be anything but righteous – a sinner – a sinner who works for the enemy – the Roman government, and more than likely cheats his neighbours and community.

But maybe, just 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 and accusations. The traditional interpretation that Zacchaeus is a sinner who's converted tricks us into committing the very sin that the story condemns. It presents Zacchaeus not as a righteous and generous man who is wrongly scorned by his prejudiced neighbours, but as the story of a penitent sinner. Turns out, that Zacchaeus does live up to his name. He is, in fact, 'the righteous one.' Turns out, Jesus knew that all along!

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 before 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.

So, how far are we willing to go to protect a flawed idea? Or to overlook a mistaken assumption? Or to keep intact a faulty theory? When it comes to hanging onto some of our cherished theological formulas, apparently many of us are willing to go pretty far.

In the story about Zacchaeus, most interpreters and translators have taken it to be a classic repentance story: Jesus comes to the home of a despised chief tax collector who, in a fit of contrition, vows to give away half of his wealth and exceed by four times, the requirements of the law for restitution.

There are a number of reasons for this change of heart, but the main one is this: contrary to most contemporary translations, the tense of the verbs in Zacchaeus' declaration is present, rather than future. That means Zacchaeus isn't promising or pledging, "Look, half of my possessions I will give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Rather, Zacchaeus is boasting or justifying himself, probably in response to the grumbling of the crowd, "Look, half of my possessions I **give** to the poor.... and I **pay back four times**" – as in right now, already, as a matter of practice. These are things he is already doing, even before meeting Jesus. This chief tax collector, who receives only disdain from his neighbours, is actually far more generous and intentional about doing justice than is the respectable ruler of a previous story in Luke - the one who refuses to give up his possessions to follow Jesus.

So why the variant translations? Those who translate the verbs as future-oriented appeal to a grammatical category called a "present-future" tense. The problem is that this is the one and only occurrence of this unusual verb tense in Luke. So rather than translate this sentence in the present tense as in the original Greek, and which would completely jeopardize interpreting this as a repentance scene – translators have actually created a new grammatical category that occurs once and only once, to justify their own theological interpretation and bias. Almost every translator, interpreter, or copier, falls victim to their own bias, or has his or her own agenda, even if it's subconscious and they don't realize it.

Unfortunately, some flawed ideas die hard, and one of the most cherished

Christian ideas is that repentance *a/ways* precedes salvation. So, at least two things are at stake here. First, it's hard for us to believe that a sinner could receive salvation without first repenting. And since Jesus says, "Today, salvation has come to this house," it must mean that Zacchaeus has repented, right? Yet, there it is; Jesus has singled out Zacchaeus in order to stay with him, honouring him with his presence, much to the chagrin of the crowd. And then Jesus honours him a second time by not arguing with his claim about his righteous behaviour but instead affirming it, declaring that no matter what the crowds may think, Zacchaeus is indeed a child of Abraham, one of the covenantal people, a beloved child of God. Like it or not, Jesus seems to say, and contrary to all expectation, this chief tax collector is one of God's own and, even more, he lives like a child of God!

Second, many of us struggle trying to imagine that God would just forgive sin, apart from some meaningful repentance. After all, if God just forgave us, what would become of God's justice? Well, this passage is not really about sin and forgiveness -- at least Luke doesn't use those terms. What if, however, God doesn't care as much about justice as we do? That is, what if justice wasn't the primary category God uses all along? Maybe justice is our way of tracking each other, our way of defining each other, of keeping count, of keeping score, of following who's in and who's out, who's up and who's down. If this is so, if God's love regularly trumps God's justice – and I believe Jesus dies precisely to show us that it does – then we're operating with flawed categories.

God, Jesus, the whole biblical story, as it turns out, isn't primarily about justice,

but about relationship - God's deep, abiding, tenacious desire to be in relationship with each one of us, and all of us, which, when you think about it, was pretty much what the Reformation was all about – declaring that God is a lot more like a loving parent than a tyrannical monarch, a lot more interested in relationship with us than holding righteousness over us. Luther's great insight into Romans is that the phrase of Paul's, "the righteousness of God" isn't the righteousness God expects from us and by which God judges us, but rather is the righteousness God gives us freely and unconditionally in Christ," so that we – whether tax collector or teacher, cleric or homemaker – can hear and believe that salvation has come to us through Christ.

Yes, God can just forgive sin, and God can pronounce salvation apart from repentance. Why? Because it's God who is doing it. And because this God is determined, even desperate, to be in relationship with all of us so that, in turn, we might be in relationship with each other. This may not be easy for us to hear. We like our formulas because they give us a way to manage the illusion that maybe we're still in control, at least a little bit; that maybe God isn't quite so wildly free as the Bible portrays; that maybe there are rules we can know and follow and hold others accountable to. All that disappears when God just forgives sin and pronounces blessings.

But maybe that's exactly why Jesus again shocks the crowds and disciples alike by seeking out this rich tax collector, honouring him, affirming him, naming him a child of God and declaring that, indeed, salvation has come this very day to his household. Maybe it's to remind us that we never were in control in the first place,

which, while hard to take, proves in the long run to be a good thing as God's mercy so greatly exceeds either our need or our expectations. Thanks be to God.

Amen.