

## **“Zacchaeus – A Place for the Outcast”**

March 8, 2020

*A Place at the Table* series – 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent

Ok folks, everybody join in...

“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.”

Most of us know this story. We sang the song. We colored in the coloring book. Some of us have read the Gospel of Luke front to back. We learned about a man who overcame his shortcomings and became a Jesus seeker.

Ok, let me begin by stressing this. There is absolutely nothing wrong with any of what I just mentioned. This morning, I'd like to invite us on take another journey through this very familiar story. What if everything you know about this text is absolutely true, and at the same time, something else was going on in plain sight?

But first let's talk about bologna sandwiches. And a friend of mine in LA. Randall was standing at a train station, on his way to work and he saw a man folded up in the corner, clutching a piece of cardboard that simply had one word - “hungry.” Randall walked over to the man; he took out his lunch, a bologna sandwich, and asked, “Would you like my lunch?” “Thank you,” the man replied, accepted the sandwich, and put it in his bag.

How was my friend able to meet this man's need? How was he able to be Christ in this situation? And what can we learn from this?

In our text this morning we are introduced to a man called Zacchaeus. Here is what we know about him from the story: he was a chief tax collector. He was rich. And he was trying to see who Jesus was. But he could not, we are told, “on account of the crowd. Because he was small in stature.”

Here's a question...does this have to mean that that he was literally short? That he was physically short in stature? There is nothing that necessarily indicates this. The word here is one of those little Greek words that we use all the time – micro. It's where we get microscope, microphone, microwave, that kind of thing.

But in the language of the New Testament, it is a term used for a wide variety of descriptions: small in length, height, or distance. Of time, as in young. And often of being low in social standing or respect.

You know, as in how a tax collector would have been viewed by a group of devout Jews circling around their Rabbi.

They were the in crowd. He was not. They had their circle. He was outside of it. He wanted to see who Jesus was. But he couldn't. You know, because of the crowd.

Seeing past our circle takes vision. Moving outside of that comfort zone takes courage. But meeting people where they are at, seeing and upholding their humanity sometimes takes a little creativity. Like my mother in law Michelle, pumping gas in GR.

She was at the station when she noticed a man asking the employee at the coffee bakery place if they had any day olds, and then saw him rifling through the trash for discarded cans. As he was leaving the parking lot, Michelle ran and caught up with him, ten-dollar bill in hand. "Sir, I think you dropped this back there." No, I don't see how I could have. "No sir...I'm pretty I saw you drop this. Here, this is yours."

Ok, back to Zacchaeus. Remember this is a story about seeking. Here is another important detail. He wasn't trying to see Jesus. He was trying to see who Jesus was. To be seen is different than to be seen and known.

Ok, this is where it gets all kinds of awesome. He was trying to see who Jesus was, and it turn out that it ends up that it is Jesus who saw who he was.

Jesus doesn't just invite us over; he invites himself over to our place. Jesus meets us where we are at, to where we are. At home. With the clutter. In our pain. In our confusion. In our unbelief and with our doubts. In our anger and among our confusion. Jesus invites himself in and joins us there. Because he sees us and because he knows us.

That is exactly what he does with Zacchaeus. "I must stay at your house today." We learned last week that we don't need to be perfect, or even that great, to start following God. To answer God's calling. Because God sees us in ways others do not. He takes our mess and makes it into his message.

Look what happens next in our story. This is really good stuff. We have to read this very carefully. Verse 8: "And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, 'Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.'"

Any grammar geeks out there catching this? "I give." "I restore." These are not in the future tense. It's not "I will give." It might be that Zacchaeus was speaking in what is called the "narrative implied future." But it might just be, that these were things Zacchaeus was already doing. That the in crowd, with their circle could not possible imagine a someone who was a successful tax collector, and was also ethical. And it was Jesus, then, who saw him for who he was.

Because Jesus sees the outcast. And Jesus is Savior and Healer. Sometimes he heals the person because that is what is needed. And sometimes he heals the entire

situation. Bringing people together. Seeing people for who they really are, and inviting us to do the same.

Ours is the God who comes to us. Our God is the parent who sees the prodigal returning, and runs into the street to meet him. Jesus doesn't only invite us to his table, he comes to our table.

This image of God pursuing us is the lens through which we should read the story of Zacchaeus. How do we know this? After saving and restoring Zacchaeus (and his situation?), Jesus tells us this explicitly. He states his purpose as clearly as he does anywhere in Scripture, "the Son of Man has come to seek and to save the lost."

One way of reflecting on this text is as a story of a man with struggles and difficulties who overcomes them and strives to reach for an encounter with God through Christ. The implication then is a challenge for us to overcome the obstacles in our own lives, and strive to seek Jesus. It becomes a story about seeking. About Zacchaeus the Jesus seeker.

But let's see what happens if we read this story as being primarily about Jesus. In Luke's gospel we see God in the story of a woman desperately seeking a lost coin. It's not about the coin. Of a shepherd who risks the flock to seek and save one lost sheep. It's not about the sheep. And a father who sees one son returning home and runs to him, while comforting his other son that he has always been with him.

It is against this backdrop that in Luke 19 we see a story of a seeker. Of a Jesus who by his own words comes "to seek and to save the lost." The story is about a seeker all right. It is about Jesus, the Zacchaeus seeker. Jesus seeks those on the outside looking in.

And he invites us to do the same.

So Lillian asked me this recently. "Daddy, what is a 'Christian?'" Now there's a loaded question. It is a question that has been making people uncomfortable for 2,000 years. Fun fact, Jesus didn't call his followers Christians. And his followers didn't call his followers Christians either.

It was the Romans, in Antioch. They saw these rather bizarre behaviors. Radical hospitality toward strangers. A complete disregard for the social barriers that had kept the Empire humming in good order for generations. These people seemed to pay little attention to the lines drawn on gender, race, class. They said there was no male or female, no Greek or Jew, no slave or free. Now that is just bonkers.

So the Romans had to come up with a new term entirely. Christians. "Little Christs." It was like they were saying, "Now wait, wait, wait, you guys aren't just Jesus fans. You folks aren't simply listening to what he said. You, are we getting this right, you actually think that you can be like him?" And for generations, our answer has been.

We're sure gonna give it our best try.

We are called to follow Christ, to listen to Christ, but at an ultimate level we are called to be like him. 1 John puts it this way, "Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked." Ephesians implores us to "be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love."

The primary way to read a story about Jesus, then, is if at all possible by asking this critical question: What is Jesus doing and how can I do the same thing?

In the story of Zacchaeus, what is Jesus doing, and how can we do the same thing?

Following in the ways of the master means we will begin to see people like Jesus sees people. In our story what is Jesus doing? He sees who Zacchaeus is, who he has been, who he could be. He sees past the in crowd. Outside the circle. To the one in the tree. The one who had been shorted.

So there's my friend Randall in LA. Another week, another Tuesday. Same train station, same man, bologna sandwich. Would you like my lunch? Yes, thank you. In the bag. The next week, ah...he brought two sandwiches. Yes, thank you so much. In the bag. Both of them. Week by week, two sandwiches. Then three. Four. In the bag.

So what do we do with this? I would challenge each of us to ask the dangerous question: Who are the tree climbers? With whom would Jesus dine? If he looked past the crowd, the in crowd, the establishment, who would he see?

I've got some ideas.

Greta Thunberg. When a child stands up for what she believes and tries to make her world better for the next generation, and is ridiculed, Jesus would look past the status quo and protect her humanity. I'll let you Google what an oil company did to her recently, but it is unthinkable evil. And Jesus is in the business of healing the evils of our world.

Jesus looks past our status quo and sees the one trying to get a glimpse from the outside. The widow, the orphan, the prisoner, even the one we killed this week. He sees them intimately. Unflinchingly.

And he is calling us to go and do likewise. To see people, not just notice them. To listen to those around us, not just hear their words. To embrace their humanity.

We're at the mall, Lillian and I, and near the play area at the food court I see a guy sitting with his kiddo, wearing a MAGA hat. Taking her by the hand, I lead Lillian over with me. "I want to show you how something called 'politics' works."

We go over to their table and I simply say, "I don't think we voted for the same person. I'm pretty sure we're not going to the next time around. But I wanted to let you know that I respect the fact that you believe in something and that you feel comfortable

expressing that.” His response was something along the lines of “Hey, thanks man.”

No, we’re not solving the world’s problems. Yet, but it’s a start.

So who are the tree climbers in your life? If Jesus looked past your circle, who would he see peering in from the outside? Maybe it might be better if we did away with social circles, like Glennon Doyle suggests, horseshoes are better. You know, a circle, with some space for others. It’s little things. It’s the coloring corner back there next to the donuts. Where kiddos and parents can sit and feel safe, and welcome, at the same time. It’s new bathrooms for Family Promise. Maybe it’s sitting at a different table at coffee hour. Or inviting a new face to coffee.

Four bologna sandwiches go in the bag. At some point, I think it was like 10 sandwiches, it got the best of my friend. What is up with this? Is he not hungry? Is he not hungry now? Is there something deficient in how I make a bologna sandwich?

“So where are you off to?” Randall asked. “Mind if I tag along?”

The man got up from the station, tattered backpack in hand and invited my friend along. To the underpass he called home. He had been taking his bag of sandwiches and dividing them up between the dozen or so men who slept there. It was God bringing a little spark of light in an otherwise dark circumstance.

And my friend Randall had become a part of it. Because he had seen the man at the train station holding the cardboard sign. Because he had taken the time to see him for who he was, not a beggar, but a fellow human being.

He had noticed him. He had seen him. And yes, because he had gone to his place for dinner.