

SERMON APRIL 6, 2025

Sermon Text Lk 19: 1-10 (NIV)

19 Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. **2** A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. **3** He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. **4** So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

5 When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” **6** So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

7 All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.”

8 But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”

9 Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. **10** For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

Holy Wisdom, Holy Word. **Thanks be to God!**

SERMON “everything [in] between: righteousness & mercy”

In the movie “Schindler’s List”, Oskar Schindler is a business man in a strange and surreal world – the world of Nazi Germany in the 1930’s. He’s a pretty self-absorbed person, looking for ways to make big money in a growing wartime economy. So what if his business is growing because his Jewish competitors are being shut down by the Third Reich? That’s not his problem! If he doesn’t take business advantage of this opportunity laid in his lap, someone else will snap it up! He even uses the opportunity to use cheap or free Jewish laborers given to him by the government when he can’t find enough workers. He tries to ignore what is going on around him, making his money, looking the other way at the disturbing actions by the government. But a man that becomes essential to his operation, a Jewish bookkeeper, convinces him through their growing relationship

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of respect, to put more and more Jewish people onto his payroll. And at some point Schindler shifts from taking advantage of the situation to full engagement in saving as many lives as he can – because taking them into his factory is keeping them from being deported to the concentration camps’ gas chambers. Hundreds of Jewish people survived the Holocaust because he was transformed from someone who chose to take advantage of the situation, into someone who saved lives in restitution for his failure to speak and act earlier. The transformation of this one man pulled him into a community of survivors, whose descendants still honor him to this day.

How does transformation occur? How does someone go from a self-centered life to one lived for, and responsible to, others? Jesus’ ministry contains many stories of lives transformed – physically, emotionally, spiritually. And in his walk to Jerusalem and his death, we continue to see him teach and heal – with healing often being a transformation of someone outcast in the community being reintegrated back into the fold. Today we look at one more of those transformations, the transformation of a man named Zacchaeus.

The first two verses of Chapter 19 of this Gospel share quite a bit about the protagonist in this story told for Luke’s first century listeners. The first thing it told them was identifying Zacchaeus as a “chief tax collector.” We know tax collectors were despised by the Jewish community during this period of Roman occupation – many scripture passages pair “tax collectors” and “sinners” together. So universal was the hatred of this position, that Luke often uses this group as his prototype for an outcast. But I’ve never really read just *why* they were so despised – so I did a little research this week. And the tax collector position worked differently than I had always assumed. I pictured them as employees of the Roman government. But actually, Rome “outsourced” the collection of all of the indirect taxes, tariffs, tolls and custom fees in the nations they occupied to entrepreneurs. These entrepreneurs, the chief tax collectors, would pay up front the money the Roman governors “assessed” for an area, and then pay themselves back through the collecting of all these taxes from the individuals living in the area, or traders coming into the area to do business. This chief tax collector would bring on tax collectors under him to do the actual collection within a smaller subset of the region – a neighborhood of a city, a village. And, each tax collector had complete control over what each individual was charged.

Another thing the chief tax collector purchased with his investment was muscle. He was provided the support of the Roman government – they would

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assign military guards for collections booths and travel escorts for the tax collectors. And chief tax collectors could also call upon the military to help with “enforcement” in delinquent situations, even using the military to help physically remove people from property to pay for being in arrears. And getting behind in taxes happened all the time – because the chief tax collector had complete authority to decide what was owed, and was allowed to charge exorbitant interest for delinquent accounts. People had no recourse to complain or seek justice over what they were being assessed – there was no due process. Rome didn’t care – they’d already received their money. So the system was ripe for corruption. The chief tax collector was obviously not just looking to recoup his money – he wanted to make a profit. But there was no check or balance on how much profit he could extract, because he had the muscle of the Roman army to enforce whatever he assessed. So yes – it was very lucrative to be able to buy into this racket. But it came at another cost: the loss of respect of family and friends, a loss of connection to the community life that was integral to daily living in Judaism and the Middle East. The price of having access to accumulating wealth included: isolation; shunning; derision; loathing. Not only did these parasites collude with the occupying army, not only did they break Mosaic law by charging interest to their fellow Jews. They violated the norms of the community in preying on their neighbors. THAT’s why tax collectors were despised. They were the first century equivalent of a corporate executive who throws thousands out of work by closing plants in order to juice the stock price just before they cash out their stock options. Or, modern greedy pharmaceutical executives charging 300% - 500% markup on insulin or cancer treatment drugs.

Zacchaeus. A man who was not just a tax collector, but a chief tax collector. And not just someone making a good living off of the misfortunes of others – he became wealthy off of it. Another word used to describe Zacchaeus was his stature – he was short. In some pictorial depictions of this story, some have portrayed Zacchaeus almost as having dwarfism. I think this is a little extreme depiction. More likely this was a literary device, so that Zacchaeus’ social stature of being looked down upon was visually conveyed. Being looked down upon as a result of the means by which he made his riches. He wouldn’t have had much of a social life unless it came to entertaining Roman functionaries. He wouldn’t have been invited into Jewish homes – and he wouldn’t have any invites he extended accepted by Jewish people in the community he lived in. He had all the wealth anyone could want at that time – a spacious home, luxury goods, expensive delicacies, fine linens, jewels in the rings on his fingers, servants to wait on him.

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We hear nothing about a family that is part of his household. This is someone who lives the dream – but without friends, possibly without family. Without respect. Without community.

Something called to Zacchaeus the day Jesus was passing through town, with no apparent intention of spending a lot of time in Jericho. It creates an abrupt shift in the story when Jesus stops, and looks up in the tree Zacchaeus had climbed up in order to see over the crowds and glimpse this man everyone is talking about. But Jesus doesn't just stop. He calls this man by his name, and invites himself into Zacchaeus' home. Jesus already knew Zacchaeus before he met him in person. He knew this man's past invitations to his Jewish neighbors had been rejected, that Zacchaeus was unlikely to offer that hospitality out of fear of another rejection even though he could afford to be hospitable. So Jesus took the opportunity to act on a longing he detected in this despised man – a longing to interact with others, a longing to belong. Jesus knew Zacchaeus before he met him. Zacchaeus yearning becomes apparent – he jumped down, and gladly accepted the offer to host Jesus, letting him stay in his home. Jesus' stopped his single minded journey to Jerusalem for a little bit, to let this man experience community once again.

But as we have heard in other events in Jesus' ministry, grumbling immediately occurred. Luke tells us, "All the people saw this and began to mutter, '(Jesus) has gone to be the guest of a sinner.'" Just like in the story of the Lost Sheep we explored last week, the expectation by the Jewish people was to be righteous, which they defined as being in right-relationship with God and neighbor through compliance to Mosaic law and the norms of the community. Zacchaeus' profession, and the ill-gotten gains he achieved through it, would have precluded him from being considered righteous and precluded him from interacting with others that were labeled righteous.

Jesus' call to Zacchaeus to come down and take him into his home wasn't predicated on Zacchaeus doing something first. Jesus' call to Zacchaeus didn't come with strings attached, with expectations about behavior, with caveats. Zacchaeus had the option to say "no thanks," to decline the opportunity that was extended, to go on his way to his life of comfort after seeing what he came to see, Jesus walking down the street. But something in Zacchaeus changed when he heard his name. This invitation was heard not just in his head, but in his heart – and a completely unexpected response came out of him. Maybe it was being

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seen. Maybe it was hearing his name called out – how DID Jesus know his name? Maybe it was someone actually wanting to interact with him. Whatever touched him, he immediately changed. He not only accepted the opportunity to host Jesus, but he then initiated change in his own life. Zacchaeus' priorities shifted, and he was transformed. It's recorded that he said after getting down from the tree: "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." He not only immediately stopped abusing his neighbors financially going forward; he was going to make restitution for wrongs of the past. Give up half his wealth. Repay those excessive profits he made at 4 times the original value – more than the amount required under Mosaic law. Jesus' invitation not only changed him, it made Zacchaeus initiate what was needed to bring himself back into community with his Jewish neighbors. Jesus called him "a son of Abraham," another way of referring to people of Jewish faith and lineage. Like the Lost Sheep, Jesus' was celebrating bringing him back into the flock. Jesus' mercy in calling him down, reaching out to him and treating him with dignity, elevating his status in the community by giving this outcast the honor of hosting the visiting rabbi, exalted Zacchaeus. In response to Jesus' mercy, Zacchaeus' righteousness was restored.

In the previous chapter to the one we read in Luke is the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. Jesus' told this story of two men, one considered righteous by their society's standards, a Pharisee, and the other a despised tax collector. Both went to the temple to pray. The Pharisee prayed about himself, turning thanks to God into a "boy I'm glad I'm not like other people who don't do good things – God, look at all I'm doing!" The tax collector, on the other hand, prayed in humility, in confession, accepting his sinfulness and wrongdoing to God and his neighbor. Jesus named the tax collector in this story as the example of righteousness, and ended with these words: "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and those that humble themselves will be exalted."

Jesus' stories about who is righteous thread together with the story of Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus humbled himself by tossing aside his dignity as an adult, running down the street and climbing up into a tree to get a glimpse of Jesus. He humbled himself by dropping to the ground when called. And unlike another encounter Jesus had, with the rich young ruler who followed all the rules and was considered righteous by religious law, but couldn't walk away from his wealth when asked by Jesus, Zacchaeus didn't need to be asked – he immediately volunteered he was selling half of what he owned to give to the poor. He

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immediately offered restitution to those he had wronged. And so in the story of Zacchaeus, we really have another miracle story: Jesus has raised up someone who was dead to the community, and resurrected them into a right relationship with God and neighbor.

The artistic vision of Lauren Wright Pittman in today's bulletin cover art pictures Zacchaeus gladly coming down from the sycamore fig tree. The significance of the type of tree speaks to Zacchaeus' eventual shift from selfishness to generosity – the figs of the sycamore fig are tiny, not juicy, not very tasty. They were only harvested by the poor who needed something to eat. In her painting, she depicts the tree with an area of brown and lifeless leaves on the right hand side. This is where Zacchaeus had been sitting trying to see Jesus. It represents his life before being called. He climbs down through green leaves, lush fruit, symbolizing his return to life, his own resurrection by answering Jesus' call to him to come back, through Jesus, to reestablish relationship with others and with his Creator. In this depiction, Zacchaeus only looks at Jesus – he, and Jesus, are ignoring the grumbling of others. His face shows joy. The picture tries to capture what Jesus explained about his actions in the final line of the story: "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." The expressions on Jesus' and Zacchaeus' faces reveal that this mission was accomplished.

We hope we are the ones transformed by our faith in Jesus. But there is a caution for us in reading the story of Zacchaeus' transformation. We can judge someone's worthiness, someone's value, by what they can do for us, by external signs of society's values: wealth, education, their appearance. We can reject those who don't meet our values, and expect them to make the first move in finding worthiness in our eyes. Jesus didn't wait for Zacchaeus to come to him; Jesus came to where Zacchaeus was. And so on this last Sunday before we remember and reflect upon the events in Jerusalem that occurred in holy week, we need to picture ourselves first as Zacchaeus, as we also called before we did anything to deserve mercy, brought back into relationship with God through Jesus' saving acts on Calvary. And as Christians,, we also need to picture ourselves following what Jesus' modeled, going to others the world doesn't see as deserving, going out to bring them into the fold. God's mercy is sufficient to make one righteous. "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." So also, must we show that same mercy. Amen.

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