Beyond the Pale

Luke 19:1-10

Grace Hills Baptist Church

October 30, 2016

In 1169, a Norman force landed near a place in Ireland called Wexford, soon to be followed by the English king Henry II. The king would pronounce the people “ungovernable,” and yet he and his successors attempted for almost a millennium to do just that: to govern the Irish people that the English had conquered. In this attempt, some of the most draconian measures were enacted into law: Irish dress and hairstyle were declared illegal; a person could be jailed for riding a horse without an English saddle; speaking in the native Irish tongue could cause the forfeiture of land and property; Irish sports were forbidden; and “family mingling,” which included fostering children and marrying across ethnic and religious lines, was punishable by death.[[1]](#footnote-1) Needless to say, life under English rule was horrific for many Irishmen and women for a long, long time.

Yet even with such heavy-handed policies, the English could not completely wipe out Irish culture, religion, and custom. The English were badly outnumbered, after all, and did not possess the means to stamp out every Irish dissident, silence every Irish song, or end every Irish sporting event. Most of the time the English overlords huddled in a few towns on the eastern shore of Ireland, building large, secure estates and developing a nation within a nation. The English aristocracy in Ireland began to develop the mentality of a people under siege; eventually, they built a physical boundary, an actual wall, to fence out the Irish barbarians. They called this wall “the Pale,” from the Latin word for stake, *palus*. “Inside the Pale was an Anglo-Norman kingdom with armed security, a structured feudal system and a sense of settled superiority. Beyond the Pale – that was beyond all civilization, an unruly Ireland living on its own terms.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Eventually this phrase – to be “beyond the pale” – came to describe people who were beyond redemption, folks no civilized person would associate with, individuals who were looked down upon because they deserved no better. They were barbarians, sinners, outcasts – they were beyond the pale.

Who, for you, is beyond the pale? Is there a person who has gone so far that you could never forgive them? Is there a group of people you view with suspicion, just because of who there are? Are there neighborhoods where you automatically lock your doors? Are there kids you don’t let your children play with? Are there individuals or groups who, for no other reason than who they are, are not people you like or trust or consider worthy?

We may not like to admit it, but most of us have inherited or learned a prejudiced way of seeing the world. It may be based on what we overheard at the family dinner table as a child. It may come from our own experiences, where certain professions seemed to be filled with cheats or certain socioeconomic groups seemed to have more than their fair share of bad apples. Or it may just be rooted in our ingrained fear of the different, the “others” out there who have different accents, different music, different family norms, different behaviors. Many of us recognize the unfairness of this, fighting against our ingrained racism or classism or sexism our whole lives, but those prejudices seem to be hardwired into us. It can be a struggle to look past the skin color or the accent or the job title or the house address to see this different person as a child of God.

Since we see this happen in our own lives, we shouldn’t be surprised to see that the Bible is filled with prejudiced people as well. And it isn’t always the bad guys, though there are plenty – like Haman and Pharoah – who let their hatred of others drive them to destructive behavior. It’s also people like James and John, who want to call down fire on the Samaritans. It’s also people like Jonah, the prophet of God who initially refused to carry a warning to the people of Nineveh of a coming tragedy. It’s even people like Peter, who had to fight against his inclination that Gentiles were somehow unclean and less able to find salvation.

In fact, in the time of Jesus there were entire categories of people who were excluded in varying degrees within the community of the faithful. Lepers and the mentally ill were sometimes forced to live in isolation, even in the wilderness or among the tombs. Prostitutes and sexually immoral individuals were ridiculed and shamed. Gentiles were unable to enter certain parts of the Temple. And people who worked for the Romans were seen as traitors to their own people.

One such group seen as collaborators were tax collectors. Rome, as an occupying power, demanded a tribute from the lands of Judea and Galilee. To obtain their taxes, Rome commissioned locals as revenuers and toll takers. These individuals could potentially grow quite wealthy, but at a high cost: they were held in low esteem by their neighbors. In fact, ancient sources indicate that tax collectors often had to hire bodyguards to go about their work. Apparently, many faithful and proud Jews viewed tax collectors as “beyond the pale.” They were irredeemable…but not to Jesus.

This may be why tax collectors show up so much in the Gospels, particularly in Luke’s Gospel. In Luke, we find John the Baptist telling some tax collectors what they can do to seek reconciliation with God.[[3]](#footnote-3) Later, Jesus calls Levi the toll booth operator to follow him, then goes to a party at Levi’s house.[[4]](#footnote-4) Luke later shares Jesus’ parable highlighting the disdain a religious Pharisee holds for another tax collector; Jesus himself sees the repentant tax collector as more praiseworthy.[[5]](#footnote-5) Luke makes sure to tell his readers that tax collectors were among those who flocked after Jesus.[[6]](#footnote-6) And in our passage today, we find Jesus again associating with a tax collector, Zacchaeus.

Zacchaeus, we can be sure, was not the most religiously-acceptable person. We know this from the two things Luke makes sure to tell us: he was a chief tax collector, and he was rich. A chief tax collector would have been the person who bought the franchise to collect Roman taxes in a region or district, in this case, Jericho. They would pay the tax up-front, and then collect the tax from the citizens of the city. Yet if they only collected what they had already paid to Rome, they would never turn a profit…and that was the whole point of becoming a chief tax collector. Why else would they help the governing power and alienate their fellow Jews? So they would collect the tax – and also some additional funds, some fees and charges that would go into their own coffers, not Rome’s. That’s how they turned a profit – and it is apparent that this has been Zacchaeus’ practice. Luke makes sure to tell us that Zacchaeus is rich, and that richness carries a suspicion, because Zacchaeus could only get rich through immoral behavior.

Yet something is going on with Zacchaeus. God is doing something in him, even before he meets Jesus. So when he hears that this travelling rabbi – who some say is the Messiah – is passing that way, Zacchaeus goes to see him. But he doesn’t do what the rich and powerful do when they want to see someone; Zacchaeus doesn’t force his way to the front of the crowd with his hired muscle, and he doesn’t send a servant to Peter to arrange a private meeting with Jesus at a fashionable Jericho eatery. Zacchaeus joins the crowd, and when he can’t see Jesus, he finds a tree to climb. Zacchaeus is already changing.

The people in the crowd can’t see this, though. They can’t fathom the thought that a tax collector, particularly a chief tax collector, would be willing and able to repent of his greed and make restitution. How could Zacchaeus ever find righteousness? He was a cheat and a money-grubber and a swindler and…their list of insults could go on. In short, he was different, an outsider, someone they thought was beyond the pale of God’s grace. Not only was he different, Zacchaeus had also gotten rich – by extorting the very people in the crowd. So when Jesus said he was going to Zacchaeus’ house to eat, the crowd was stymied. And when Jesus went so far as to say that salvation had come to Zacchaeus and that he, too, was a son of Abraham – part of the Jewish community of faith – they were dumbfounded. Zacchaeus? REALLY?

Jesus, though, could see past the outer trappings of Zacchaeus’ wealth. He could see past the inflated tax figures and the unscrupulous behavior. He didn’t condone Zacchaeus’ past or whitewash it, but he did see through it to a man who was coming to realize his own need for God’s grace – and who was willing to go to extraordinary lengths to just catch a glimpse of Jesus. What could Zacchaeus hope would come from a glimpse? I don’t know – but Jesus wasn’t going to let such budding faith wither in the face of past failures and community condemnation. Even though every other person there that day would have gone away and talked about Zacchaeus behind his back, Jesus chose to befriend this chief tax collector. He set aside the prejudice and past experiences that everyone had for men like Zacchaeus. Jesus was going to draw Zacchaeus out, break bread with him, spend time with him.

And what an effect Jesus’ simple response to Zacchaeus’ desire for connection had! Somewhere in the course of the afternoon, Zacchaeus apparently chose of his own free will to change his ways. [READ Luke 19:8] The chief tax collector has discovered, through his encounter with God in Jesus, that what he has been doing is wrong. If he is going to live as the changed man he has become, he will have to change his ways, as well. He will be a person of generosity. He will be a person of integrity. He will be a person who seeks to right his wrongs. He, Zacchaeus, the hated chief tax collector, will transcend his own failings and the justified low opinion of others. He will choose to live the way of Christ.

No wonder Jesus praises him! [READ Luke 19:9] Zacchaeus is starting to live out his faith, and Jesus himself had said, “No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit.”[[7]](#footnote-7) This echoed John the Baptist’s own instruction to the crowds, including the tax collectors: “Bear fruit worthy of repentance.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Zacchaeus has experienced true conversion – begun as Jesus approached Jericho, realized in his experience of Jesus at the table of fellowship – and he has chosen the path of repentance. He is, indeed, a son of Abraham – no longer excluded by the community of faith, but included by the Lord of the community.

This was a change that the people of Jericho could not see. They could not look past the things about Zacchaeus that they considered “beyond the pale.” Jesus could. I wonder, can we? Among those we see as different, can we see them as children of God, however far from home they have wandered or near to home they’ve stayed? Among those we exclude for their behavior or the pain they’ve inflicted on us or on others, can we see the ways God is reaching out to them? Among those we avoid, can we see the ways they are beginning to bear good fruit, fruit in keeping with repentance? Or are we like the people of Jericho, seeing only the chief tax collector, the sinner, and not seeing the person, the child of God whom Jesus is already beginning to redeem?

May we be known as people of inclusion, not exclusion. May we be known as people who pronounce salvation, not condemnation. And may we be known as people of grace with one another, not people of anger and division. Let us pray.

1. The Immortal Irishman, 6 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Immortal Irishman, 7 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Luke 3:12=13 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Luke 5:27-32 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Luke 18:9-14 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Luke 15:1 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Luke 6:43-44 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Luke 3:8 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)