

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior,
The Messiah, Jesus Christ, amen.

Before we changed to the Narrative Lectionary, this story about the wee little man, Zacchaeus, always fell on the same Sunday as Reformation Sunday. As a result, we never read it in Church because we always used the Gospel appointed for Reformation instead. So, this is the first time I've really looked at Zacchaeus with a critical eye, including all the commentaries and in the original Greek language. I discovered it's much more than a cute little tale we all learned in Sunday School. It is that, I mean, who remembers singing:

(SLIDE)

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.
And as the Savior came that way,
He looked up in the tree,
Spoken: And he said, "Zacchaeus, you come down from there, "
For I'm going to your house today.
For I'm going to your house today.

(SLIDE)

On one level this story is so familiar from our Sunday School Days I was tempted to just overlook it and find another part of today's readings to focus on. Then I began reading the commentaries and discovered scholars are by no means united in their interpretations on this childhood tale. The setting for our encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus is what is known as "The Travel Journal of Jesus" as

he heads toward Jerusalem and the fate that awaits him there. He set his face toward Jerusalem way back in Chapter 9 after he was transfigured on the mountain top. He has already plainly told the disciples what will happen when they arrive in Jerusalem, that he will be betrayed, handed over to the authorities, beaten, humiliated, spat upon, and killed, but on the third day he will rise from the dead. No one understood. They couldn't fathom God's Messiah dying, much less dying on a cross.

So, Luke milks all he can out of the events that happened along the way from the mountain of Transfiguration to the mountain of Calvary. That brings us to Zacchaeus. Everyone agrees he was a tax collector. He was the chief tax collector to be precise... As such, he would be required to pay the Roman authorities the required tribute and then try to earn his money back by charging his fellow Jews a tax on goods that they either bought or sold. He was also in charge of the toll booths that were set up on the roads. People had to pay, just like today, as they travelled from place to place. Because of the mostly secret tribute he paid to the Romans, his business was considered shady at best. He could charge whatever he wanted and chalk it up to the price he had to pay the Romans. As the go between he was doubly hated by his own people, the Jews. There was even more bias and hatred of tax collectors in the First Century than there is of the IRS

today. At least the IRS agents collect taxes for our own country. Imagine if we had American citizens collecting taxes for Russia or China...

Here's where the different interpretations begin. Most of us have probably heard or been taught that Zacchaeus was one of the sinners that Jesus associated with. He was a scoundrel and a cheat. He cheated his own countrymen, making him the worst of the worst. Then, after encountering Jesus, Zacchaeus repents and has a conversion. He declares he will give half his vast fortune to the poor and repay anyone he might have over charged four times the over-payment. (I wish the IRS would do that with my tax returns...) Interpreted in this way, Zacchaeus makes a wonderful story of repentance and transformation. The morale of the story is something like, after encountering Jesus, we also should repent and give to the poor and repay anyone we have hurt in the past. That's how to live a good Christian life...

The problem with that interpretation is that it isn't faithful to the original Greek text. It assumes some conversation between Zacchaeus and Jesus that just isn't there. It also changed the present tense verbs into future tense. The Greek text and some of our English translations that try to remain faithful to the original writings, have Zacchaeus declaring he already gives half of his income to the poor and he already repays anyone who he overcharges fourfold. This is in response to the grumbling of the bystanders who ask why Jesus wants to eat with this sinner

and tax collector, not in response to any call to repent by Jesus. In fact, Zacchaeus apparently already has placed his trust and had great faith in Jesus because he climbs up in that Sycamore tree long before Jesus says a single word to him.

You are free to understand this story any way you want, but I will tell you the evidence points toward a story about how a man's faith in the Messiah enabled him to overcome the hatred of his neighbors to climb up a tree and quite literally go out on a limb, just to be able to catch a passing glimpse of the Son of God. Then, when Jesus sees this demonstration of faith he says, Come down here, I must stay at your house today. In other stories Jesus tells certain people your faith has made you well, or your faith has saved you. In this story Jesus tells Zacchaeus salvation has come to your house today. It's the same thing. The faith of Zacchaeus has saved him. He was outcast, ridiculed, a socially irredeemable deplorable, yet he was found by Jesus to be a Son of Abraham. We know from last week's Gospel story that sons and daughters of Abraham are carried straight to heaven by the angels. In today's Gospel, Zacchaeus is the foil to the Rich Man from last week's sermon. Zacchaeus exceeds Levitical Law cheerfully, despite receiving nothing, but hatred and exclusion from his own neighbors and fellow Jews. In response, Jesus assures him, in front of all the gathered crowd, that salvation has come, today to him and to his entire household, not will come some day in the great by and by, but right now today.

How do we make this more than a historical event or a nice story of Zacchaeus the wee little man? There are a couple of things we can take away from this story. First, Zacchaeus went out on a limb to see Jesus. How far are we willing to go to catch a glimpse of our Lord and Savior? Most aren't even willing to get up an hour or so early and make the trip to Church or even tune in on their smart phones. I know I'm preaching to the choir, because you are up and tuned in, but I pray for all those who aren't. If that's all we get from this story, that's good, but there's something more important we might have missed.

Secondly, who are we excluding from our fellowship because of our perceived bias and prejudice? Maybe it's their race, their gender, or their political affiliation that we discount. We learn from Jesus that even the most hated of our neighbors might be a fellow Child of Abraham and by ignoring or discounting them we're missing the opportunity to see the face of Jesus in them. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, said he had a dream where all people would be judged by the content of their character and not by the color of their skin. I pray for that dream to come true in our lives. Loving our neighbors and even our enemies might be another important take away from the Zacchaeus story, but I don't think that's the most important lesson we learn here either.

Here's my biggest take away from this story. Jesus told Zacchaeus salvation had come to his house that very day. We don't have to wait for our death or for

Jesus to come again to reap the rewards of the Kingdom of God. We can live them right here and right now. I'm not talking about how Zacchaeus gave half his money to the poor. It's not about how rich or poor you are, but about your faith. Zacchaeus was free to give because he trusted in God for his daily bread. Zacchaeus was free to go out on that limb because he didn't care what other people thought about him, he only thought about how much he loved God and that allowed him to ignore all the grumbles and complaints and to show his faith in the way he lived his life. In the same way our faith is what frees us to live out our lives in ways that serve God by serving other. We are free to declare our faith without fear of what anyone else says about us because it's Jesus we care about and there's nothing more important than showing our love for Him.

There's a second verse to that old Sunday School song. It goes like this:

(SLIDE)

Zacchaeus was a wee little man,
But a happy little man was he,
Zacchaeus saw the Lord that day
And a happy man was he;
And a very happy man was he.

(SLIDE)

May we all have the faith of Zacchaeus to go out on a limb for Jesus. May our faith free us from our bondage to money and the desire for the praise of other people. May the love we have for Jesus become the most important thing in our lives and may salvation come to this house today! Amen.