

From Our Home to Theirs: Zacchaeus  
Luke 19:1-10  
Rev. Katherine C. Kerr  
First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, NC  
October 23, 2016

Dave Isay is the founder of StoryCorps, an organization whose mission is to “preserve and share humanity’s stories in order to build connections between people and create a more just and compassionate world.”<sup>1</sup> It started in 2003 with a booth in Grand Central Terminal, and has grown into the largest collection of human voices ever recorded. There are StoryCorps booths in Atlanta, Chicago and San Francisco, and mobile booths which travel across the country each year. Millions of people have shared and recorded their personal stories through this initiative.

Before launching StoryCorps, Isay made radio documentaries. Through his work, he was struck time and again by the power of the individual story, and the devastating impact on people when they were made to believe that their story didn’t matter. In his work, he sought out people who were on the margins of society- people who were told in subtle and not-so-subtle ways that they were worthless, and that no one wanted to hear what they had to say.

In one such documentary, Isay focused on the residents of one of the last flophouse hotels in New York City’s Bowery district. At one time, the area was home to dozens of flophouses- large single room occupancy buildings populated by men who had nowhere else to live, because of mental health disorders, addiction, or personal situation. The buildings were crammed with small living quarters- most just four feet wide by six feet long, packed end to end along dark, narrow hallways. It was, as you might imagine, a desolate and dreary existence.

Like a number of other journalists, Isay was fascinated by the world inside the flophouse, and he spent a lot of time visiting and talking with the men

---

<sup>1</sup> [www.storycorps.org/about](http://www.storycorps.org/about)

he met there. As was his way, he sat with man after man, and listened as they talked about whatever it was they wanted to discuss.

He eventually turned his documentary into a book, and when it had been published, he returned to the flophouse with a copy of it. He found one of the men whose stories was included, and showed it to him. The man stood silently staring at the pages for some time, and then took off running down the hall, holding the book over his head, screaming, “I exist! I exist!”<sup>2</sup>

When I read the story of Zacchaeus, though scripture doesn’t say it, I can almost hear him exclaim, “I exist!” He was far from a flophouse resident - as a chief tax collector, he had to have had a very comfortable living. But by virtue of his chosen profession, he was a pariah in society, detested and shunned by everyone around him. Because of this, he probably had more in common with the men Isay wrote about than he did with most of his socioeconomic peers. He was rejected and alone, until Jesus came to his house.

Just picture the scene- Jesus had just arrived in Jericho, and as happened when he traveled, word of his presence had spread and crowds had gathered. As we know from the gospels, these crowds were full of all kinds of people- disciples and followers who were committed to Jesus’ teachings, religious purists who mistrusted him and laid in wait to catch him in blasphemy, the idly curious and the desperate who hoped that this fabled teacher and healer about whom they had heard so much might be able to help them.

Luke doesn’t give us much information about Zacchaeus beyond the fact that he was a short tax collector. We don’t know if he wanted to see Jesus out of curiosity or faith, a need for healing or a desire to see him fail. All we know is that he wanted to see him, enough to climb a tree in order to do so.

And he got what he wanted – he saw Jesus. But he got so much more than he bargained for, because Jesus saw him.

---

<sup>2</sup> Story as told by Dave Isay in a TED Talk, Vancouver, BC, March 2015.

Out of everyone gathered there, Jesus spoke to Zacchaeus, the diminutive publican, the man everyone loved to hate. He saw something in him, something no one else could see.

The crowd was enraged, because to them Zacchaeus was one thing, and one thing only. He was a sinner. They'd figured that out, put him in his box, and stopped seeing him altogether.

But Jesus saw him. Through the layers of undesirable behavior, cultural disgust and self-loathing, Jesus saw the man Zacchaeus.

In my study of this passage, I came upon an interesting and challenging interpretation of this story which is so familiar to us all. Thanks to years of scriptural interpretation, we have come to believe that tax collectors were “a greedy combination of embezzler and extortionist, traitor[s] to [their] people and sinner[s] of the worst sort.”<sup>3</sup> Most interpretations of Luke's story of Zacchaeus rely heavily on this perspective, casting Zacchaeus as a bad guy.

And there is certainly historical evidence to back this up- the Roman system of taxation was oppressive and relied on local contractors- tax collectors- to use their knowledge of the community to squeeze as much money as they could from the people and feed it up the chain to the government.

With this information, it is no wonder that the crowd- including us- sees Zacchaeus as nothing but a sinner. We humans sure do like to place others in categories, and labeling others as sinners can be a very satisfying pastime. But there is something just a little bit too one-dimensional about this.

Think about it - if Zacchaeus really were nothing but a sinner- so far gone, so irredeemable, why did he so quickly accept Jesus' request to dine at his home? He knew who Jesus was- he had scrambled to get a glimpse of him- if all he was was evil, would it make sense that he would relish the chance to provide hospitality to Jesus, the peaceful teacher whose message was one of love and forgiveness?

---

<sup>3</sup> Dave Barnhart, “Zacchaeus: Honest and Tall,” from [www.ministrymatters.org](http://www.ministrymatters.org), 7/8/14

And then there's what he says. "Look, Lord, half of my possessions I give to the poor. And if I've cheated anyone, I repay them four times as much."

Wait, you say, that's not what you just read.

You're right. The NRSV, the version I read from, translates the verbs in the future tense: "I will give" and "I will repay." But other versions, including the King James and the Common English, translate them in the present, which is the tense we find them in the original Greek.<sup>4</sup>

It is possible that Zacchaeus was already doing these things, that in spite of his chosen profession (or perhaps because of it), he had a generous heart that others could not – or would not- see.

Now I'm not saying Zacchaeus was a saint- he clearly participated in a corrupt system which took from the many and gave to the few. His hands were not clean.

What I am saying is that perhaps there was more to him than we have wanted to see. Perhaps Jesus knew that Zacchaeus, like the rest of us, was a complex being, a sinner who was also capable of doing great good things. And perhaps Jesus seeing the truth about Zacchaeus was exactly what was needed to set him free from the very sin that had bound him up and made him invisible for so long.

What if the simple act of Jesus seeing Zacchaeus, believing there was more to him than the sin he was caught up in, enabled the man to stand a little taller and claim the good in his life? What if this simple act of humanity on Jesus' part gave Zacchaeus, for the first time, the chance to present this side of himself- to present a story counter to the insinuations and assumptions that swirled around him because of his profession? What if all it took for Zacchaeus to reclaim his true story was to be seen?

We don't see what happens to Zacchaeus after Jesus' visit. The story ends with Jesus saying, "today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham."

---

<sup>4</sup> Adapted from above

In Reformed theology, we understand salvation to be, “God’s activity on behalf of creation... in bringing all things to God’s intended goal. More specifically, salvation entails God’s deliverance of humans from the power and effects of sin.”<sup>5</sup>

If salvation is, as we proclaim in faith, more than who goes to heaven and who doesn’t, but God’s gracious work in redeeming us from our sin, then could it be possible that the simple act of Jesus seeing Zacchaeus for who he was opened the door for him to become more of who God intended him to be? And if that is possible, then wouldn’t it follow that the same would be true for each of us? And for all of God’s children?

Just a moment ago, Pen read two short but powerful verses from John’s gospel. Looking ahead to his arrest and crucifixion, Jesus addressed his disciples, seeking to impart as much of his teaching as he could in the limited time he had. And in that discourse, he proclaimed a new commandment, calling us to love as he loves.

That’s quite a proposition. The idea of loving others- not just some others, but all others- with the kind of open, forgiving heart that Jesus had is hard, overwhelming even. We may want to do it, but where would we even start?

Maybe we start where he did. We start by seeing those around us. Instead of looking through or past those we don’t know or don’t care for, those who annoy us or frighten us, what if we looked AT them, truly seeing them, and acknowledging their existence and their identity as children of God?

What would happen if more of us truly saw

- The man sleeping on the park bench
- The woman vacuuming the hallway in the office
- The girl sitting by herself at the lunch table
- The boy hiding his face underneath a hoodie

And what about

---

<sup>5</sup> Grenz, Guretzki & Nordling, Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms, (InterVarsity Press, 1999), p.105.

- The person whose political opinions make you want to pull your hair out, or
- The chatty neighbor whose endless stories interrupt your carefully scheduled day,
- The colleague at work who consistently parks himself on your very last nerve, or
- The acquaintance who tells you the same story about the same problems every time you cross paths?

If we looked beyond what is on the surface that makes us anxious or angry, beyond the differences that seem so obvious, beyond the broad categories our culture seems so determined to reduce people to, what might happen?

Might salvation come to our homes? Might we move a little bit closer to being the people- and the community- God intends for us to be?

Helen Keller, who lived an extraordinary life without the senses of sight or hearing, once said, “The only thing worse than being blind is having sight but no vision.”

Too many of us walk around in that state too often. We have sight, but we lack vision – the vision that allows us to see those around us who don’t look like us or act like us or think like us, the vision that calls us out of our narrow worldviews and into something greater and fuller. This kind of vision is scary- it asks a lot of us. But it is important. After all, we all want to be seen and accepted for who we are, and how can that truly happen if we don’t offer the same thing to others?

When we truly see those around us, acknowledging their humanity, and accepting that they, too, are created in God’s image, we take a chunk out of the walls that divide us and a step towards God’s kingdom of justice, love and acceptance for all. When we open our eyes to our brothers and sisters around us, refusing to allow the voices of suspicion and division to define them for us, but instead seeking to see them as Christ sees them, we don’t just acknowledge their existence, we acknowledge our own as well. We are not islands- we are family, and our stories are inextricably connected through the one who created us all.

When Jesus came to Zacchaeus' house, he saw him- the good, the bad and the ugly. When Jesus comes to your house, he sees you. He sees that which you want to show the world and that which you would rather keep hidden. He sees it all, and he loves you still.

Jesus calls us to love one another just as he has loved us. In order to love someone, we must know at least a piece of their story. In order to know a piece of their story, we must first see them.

Thankfully this faith community offers us countless opportunities to practice. Whether it is through a mission trip to Haiti or Mexico, connecting with a child at Westerly Hills, a caring relationship through Stephen Ministry, next month's First Wednesday program entitled "Other Voices," or simply a conversation with someone you wouldn't ordinarily talk to, I challenge you in the coming weeks to find new ways to see others and to hear their stories.

In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.