

That Sounds Familiar: Zacchaeus Was a Wee Little Man

Luke 19:1-10

August 16, 2015

First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, NC

Rev. Pen Peery

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax-collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.' So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.' Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, 'Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.' Then Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.'

+++

It is good to be back in this pulpit.

Last Sunday I was on vacation, sitting with three of my friends in the sanctuary of God's creation in Quetico Provincial Park in Ontario, Canada – camping and canoeing and fishing for my supper.

I emerged from my trip with a summer beard, some new perspective, and a rejuvenated spirit.

Along my journey to the edge of civilization– however – I was reminded of the uncivilized means by which the airline industry makes a profit.

I need someone to explain to me why one checked bag costs \$25, but the second bag costs 40% more.

And why there are now 14 different categories for ordering the way you board the plane ("would you like to pay \$10 more to board in the silver platinum early bird zone?").

Or how you quantify the one and a half extra inches of leg-room that comes with "an Economy Comfort" seat (for just \$65 more).

When the flight attendant asked me if I wanted ice with my water (and four pretzels) and almost asked her how much it would cost per cube.

What I wouldn't give to have been in the conference room of the Delta offices with the bunch of geniuses when they devised all those plans.

They should all wear signs that say: I am responsible for nickel and diming you. You're welcome.

+ + +

Zacchaeus didn't need to wear a sign. When he was around, everyone knew that he was responsible for folks getting nicked and dimed.

It makes you realize why Zacchaeus had to climb that tree to see Jesus. I know the scripture says it was because he was short in stature. But my guess is that even if he weren't the crowd that gathered to see Jesus would not have made much room for this despised tax-collector.

And Zacchaeus wasn't just a tax-collector – he was a chief tax-collector. He was the man behind the man.

Taxes in Jesus' time weren't as simple as stroking a check to your friendly IRS agent based upon your income bracket. There were bridge taxes. Each time you crossed a bridge, you paid a tax. And road taxes. Think first-century toll-booths. And poll taxes. And city taxes. And taxes on goods bought – and sold. And taxes on carts and wagons – *per wheel*. And it wasn't as if these taxes were going to pay for a popular local bond referendum, either. Taxes were for the purpose of supporting the Roman Empire – which was headquartered a long, long way away from the city of Jericho.

It's bad enough to be the person who collects all of these taxes, but the real reason why tax-collectors were so hated is because many of them exploited and intimidated the people in order to line their own pockets.

Perhaps a modern day equivalent to a tax-collector would be a person who intentionally made bad sub-prime loans just before the financial crisis. Or someone who runs a payday loan center and charges people 500% interest on their \$300 paychecks.

That was Zacchaeus.
He was the wee man behind the man.
And he was trying to see Jesus.

We don't know why Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus so badly. We aren't told that he had a strong faith. Maybe he was just curious to learn what this Jesus had to offer. Maybe he had heard about how Jesus reached out to people like him – who were scorned by the rest of society – for reasons deserved and not deserved. We don't know why Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus, but for a man of Zacchaeus' wealth and station to climb a tree, he must have wanted it something fierce.

And then, Jesus noticed him.

And then Jesus invited himself over for lunch.
And Zacchaeus was happy to welcome him – because, as you might imagine, Zacchaeus didn't have plans to have anyone else in the crowd over to eat.
And the people who saw all of this grumbled.
“He has gone to eat the house of a sinner.”

What happens next seems simple.
It's another story of how the truth and light of Jesus' presence helps people confront their sin and turn to righteousness.

Zacchaeus makes a public testimony that he will give half of his possessions away to the poor and that he will pay anyone who he has defrauded four-times what he owes them (both of which are above and beyond the biblical requirement).

Following this testimony, Jesus pronounces salvation and announces that Zacchaeus is a Son of Abraham – that is, he is every bit as important to God as the rest of the crowd.

This seems to fit with the rest of the gospel of Luke. Especially because Zacchaeus was rich. Rich people don't fare too well in Luke's gospel. Jesus tells a parable about the man who tears down his barns to build bigger barns. He asks the rich young ruler to give all that he has to the poor and follow him – a choice the young man is not willing to make. Jesus likens rich people entering the Kingdom of God to a camel passing through the eye of a needle.

And here, we find Zacchaeus – a rich tax-collector – confronted with his sin – and then repentant – which results in Jesus offering him salvation.

That's the pattern, right?

Recognizing the sin.

Repenting of the sin.

Receiving salvation.

But what if I told you that the story was different?

Let me go a little old-school and read you what Zacchaeus said from the King James Version of the Bible:

And Zacchaeus stood and said unto the Lord, 'Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold.'

Do you hear the difference?

We often read Zacchaeus as a conversion story – about a sinful man who turns his life around when he meets the Lord.

But in the Greek, the verbs that Zacchaeus uses are in the present, not the future.

It is not that he will give away half of his possessions to the poor and will restore fourfold to those whom he has defrauded in order to receive salvation.

He already does these things.

And maybe that is why Jesus notices him.
Have you thought about that?

Do you know what Zacchaeus' name means?

It means innocent, or pure, or righteous.

Do you think the Bible is being ironic or descriptive?

I imagine the surprise of the crowd.

This man whom they have shunned – who had to climb a tree because he had no place among the people – is recognized and honored by Jesus for his faithfulness.

“Today, salvation has come to this house, for he, too, is a Son of Abraham.”

Maybe instead of a pronouncement of grace for Zacchaeus, Jesus said this to remind the crowd that they should refrain from passing judgment on who does and does not deserve God's favor.

Rather than a story about Zacchaeus' conversion, I think this scripture highlights the way God continually surprises those of us who make up the crowd.

Just when we think we know what to expect about how God will act, or about how our neighbor's lives reflect (or do not reflect) faithfulness...surprise! There's more to it than we imagined.

I think that surprise is a gift. I think it is an important part of the Good News.

Because if God cannot surprise us – and unsettle the things that we have come to expect – then the life of faith runs the risk of becoming a static routine instead of a dynamic journey into the future of God's promises.

+ + +

In College Park, Georgia, there is a pastor named Creflo Dollar. You may know that name. He is another one of those TV preachers...you know how they are. Rev. Dollar has made the news recently because he asked his congregation to ante up and buy him a new \$65 million gulfstream jet. The old one was soooooo 2005.

Creflo Dollar is the pastor of World Changers Church International. It is a church that numbers its members in the tens of thousands. They have 350 people on staff.

Rev. Dollar's theology is rooted in the “prosperity gospel.” It is the understanding that if we just have enough faith, God will provide us with an abundance of material blessings.

The Presbyterian pastor and professor Tom Long tells a story about Creflo....or, as he is known to some, “Cash-flow Dollar.” Tom was in Atlanta for a speaking engagement and needed to get a quick haircut before his wife would let him out in

public. He stepped into one of those places you can just walk-in. When he sat in the chair, the woman asked Tom what he did, and when he answered that he was a Presbyterian minister she said: “Oh, I am a Christian, too! I am a member of Creflo Dollar’s church.”

Tom admitted that he thought to himself – “great I am getting a bad haircut and now I am going to get bad theology as well.” He continued the story,

“to be hospitable I played along – she was holding a razor, after all. I said, ‘Well, have you got your blessing yet?’ She said, ‘Oh yes, I’ve gotten my blessing, all right!’

‘Well, tell me about it,’ I said, expecting her to say something about the Lexus in the parking lot or the diamond earrings in the scissors drawer. But instead she said, ‘Two nights a week I get to volunteer in a shelter for battered women. I was one myself, you know, and they trust me. They need me. They know I love them.’

I sat there silently thinking, ‘My God! Jesus is loose in Creflo Dollar’s church!’”¹

+ + +

Just when we think we know what to expect – surprise!

It’s the business God is in:

Startling us with newness –

With grace in places we would least expect –

Working through people we would never assume worthy –

Reminding us that the story of salvation is on the loose –

folding in more and more people as the Kingdom comes closer into view.

+++

¹ Long, Tom, “Just In Time,” Covenant Network of Presbyterians Conference, 2005.