

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 10/30/2022



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Reformation Sunday

Revised Common Lectionary Year C

Sunday, October 30th

Luke 19:1-10

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Going out on a limb

This week's Gospel lection features the divine appointment between Jesus and the chief tax collector Zacchaeus as Jesus is passing through Jericho on His way to Jerusalem. With parallels to last week's Gospel of the Parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector going to the temple to pray (18:9-14), Zacchaeus becomes another repentant tax collector who is also justified. In our day, Jesus is still at large seeking and saving the lost and people are still willing to climb trees to see Him. There is irony here too. Jesus must bypass the religious establishment to save sinners. Apparently, the same thing applies in our time if the "Nones" and "Dones" are anything to go by. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that we are also celebrating Reformation Sunday.

Luke 19:1-10

The lection is situated in between the story of the Rich Ruler (18:18-30) and the final parable in Luke, the Parable of the Ten Minas (19:11-27). The story of Zacchaeus is unique to Luke and appears almost at the very end of the long Travel Narrative (9:51-19:27). Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus immediately follows the healing of the blind beggar (unnamed in Luke's Gospel) sitting by the roadside on the approach to Jericho. The connection between the sight of the blind beggar being restored and Zacchaeus desiring to see Jesus is not lost. The encounter of Jesus and Zacchaeus is in complete contrast to the earlier encounter of Jesus and the Rich Ruler.

¹ He entered Jericho and was passing through. ² And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³ And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small in stature. ⁴ So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way.

Jericho was a very important town in the Jordan Valley that commanded the approach to Jerusalem as well as the crossings to the lands across the river. This made Jordan one of the greatest taxation centers in Palestine. Not surprisingly, there was apparently enough work here for several tax collectors and Zacchaeus was their chief. The title of "chief tax collector" is found nowhere else. Like all the local tax collectors working for the Romans, Zacchaeus would have collected the taxes the Romans required and then some. Such tax collectors were social and religious outcasts (cf. Matthew 18:17) and no doubt hated by the populous. There is no doubt Zacchaeus, as chief tax collector, would have been a very wealthy man. He clearly did not live up to the meaning of his name (Zacchaeus meant "pure" or "righteous")! At least not yet.

Zacchaeus may have been rich but apparently something was missing in his life. He risked being out in public to see Jesus who was passing by. It would be today or never. Given his small stature, Zacchaeus must run on ahead and climb a tree to see Jesus. Running and climbing trees were additional social stigma to add to his list. Again, given his social standing, the humiliation with which Zacchaeus went to just catch a glimpse of Jesus tells us much about what was on his heart. Just like the tax collector in last week's lection praying on the temple mount with a humble and contrite heart, do we have God at work calling His elect to Him?

⁵ And 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." ⁶ So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully.

These two verses paint the picture of the preordained nature of the meeting between Jesus and Zacchaeus. As Jesus looks up and sees Zacchaeus in the tree, He states that He must stay at Zacchaeus' house. The word "*dei*" in Luke is typically translated as "must," "have to," or "it is necessary" whenever used by Jesus. When *dei* relates to another subject it is rendered as the softer "ought." Jesus' *dei* statements thus give a sense of the intense purpose with which He approached His mission. The first of such *dei* statements is in 2:49 as the boy Jesus was found in the temple: "... 'Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?'"

Zacchaeus accepts and obeys the two commands Jesus gave him: he hurries, and he receives Jesus. The fact that we read how Zacchaeus "*received him joyfully*" may be a metaphor for coming to faith.

⁷ And when they saw it, they all grumbled, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." ⁸ And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold."

Not surprisingly, the crowd could not imagine a more unlikely house to stop at and "*all grumbled.*" Zacchaeus announces to the Lord the actions that reveal his repentance and faith. There are various O.T. stipulations for repayment of theft (Exodus 22:1;4; Leviticus 6:5; Numbers 5:7). Zacchaeus is exceeding these stipulations in being willing to restore fourfold to those he had defrauded (which I imagine would have been a long list!). He also gives half of his goods to the poor. Zacchaeus demonstrates he is a changed man. Faith in action.

⁹ And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

Jesus, speaking to those that previously grumbled, announces Zacchaeus is now a true son of Abraham - not only a physical descendent but now a spiritual descent through faith (see Galatians 3:7). A rich man can be saved (see 18:26-27). Having just provided an example, Jesus then summarizes His mission in v.10: "*For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.*"

Reflections

What happened to Zacchaeus reveals to us that no person or situation is impossible. Those that are on the sidelines of society; those who feel they are too far gone; those who are despised; those who despise themselves; those struggling to climb the tree just to glimpse Jesus; these are the ones that as disciples we need to go out on a limb for and let Jesus do the rest.

The irony here is so strong the blind beggar in the preceding verses would have seen it. Jesus comes into town and avoids the established "church" so that he can save sinners. How much of the traditional church today is left scratching their heads and grumbling at falling attendance, particularly among the forty-year-olds and on down? Perhaps it is just a coincidence, but it is also Reformation Sunday...