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Luke 19:1-10; Micah 6:1-8

GRACE'S MOMENTUM

If you ever wonder what Jesus' purpose was here on earth, he tells us straight up in today's reading from Luke. Jesus says that he came "to seek out and to save the lost." Saving people. Saving lost people. Which is all of us. *That's* why Jesus came.

In this Lenten season, we have been exploring what *salvation* means in our life of faith. What does it mean to be "saved?" We first explored how it is an essential part of God's nature to save us humans and to give us life. We then explored that the way God saves us is with grace—which is love and forgiveness all rolled up in one amazing gift. This gift is *not* something you or I can ever earn. Go ahead and live an exemplary life—but don't think for a minute that your good conduct is going to earn you special status with God. We cannot earn God's love through all our good works. God's saving love is a *gift* given to those who are lost and in need. Which is every single one of us, since we all are lost in some way. And thus, we all receive this gift of grace.

But the gift of God's grace is not a stationary item that just sits there on our mantel for us to gaze upon fondly. "Oh isn't that nice: Look at that! God loves me!" Instead, grace has momentum behind it. Grace is more like a ball that is released from the top of a hill, which gathers momentum as it speeds toward us. It's on a collision course with us and the goal is that the energy of the ball will be transferred to those it impacts.

Imagine you are standing beside a fast moving river—maybe the Niagara River just before it plunges into the Falls, because as you may have noticed, that water is moving *fast!* Suddenly you lose your balance and fall in. The raging waters pull you under and you can't get

any air and are close to drowning when suddenly God's hand reaches down from above and pulls you up from the water and places safely on dry ground. As you stand there dripping wet and gasping for air, you know that your life has just been handed back to you. You have been saved. But what happens next? What happens next after you receive this gift of life? Because God does not save us just restore us to our former life. God saves in order to give us a *new* life.

This is what happens to Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus is given a new life. We know that his former life was in terrible shape. As a chief tax collector, Zacchaeus was in charge of what could be considered a large extortion operation. He and his fellow tax collectors cooperated with the Roman Empire to extract excessive taxation from the impoverished people of his country. And doing this work made Zacchaeus rich, very rich, all the while he was directly contributing to the sufferings of his neighbors. Zacchaeus had power and he had wealth and he was a traitor to his people. He had sacrificed his relationship with his own people and their welfare for the wealth he made as a tax collector. And his people despised him for it.

So imagine how stunned people were when Jesus declared he was going to eat dinner at Zacchaeus' home. Think about someone whose behavior and values you find extremely deplorable. They represent everything you can't stand. They have caused harm to others. Maybe that is a certain political figure, or a relative, or an ex-spouse. And then you learn that Jesus is going to dinner at their home. It would give the impression that Jesus is condoning the egregious things they have done and the offensive beliefs they hold.

And yet, Jesus sees these individuals as worthy of his attention, his healing, his love. If we take a moment to ponder the lives of people we find morally reprehensible, if we set aside our outrage about them for just a minute, perhaps we will also see just how wounded they are, how needy they are, how broken they are. Despite all his wealth, the life Zacchaeus had crafted

for himself had to have been a pretty lonely existence--hated and resented and shunned by his community every time he stepped outside his door. Maybe there was a deep hollowness within Zacchaeus' heart and soul that made him curious about this holy man Jesus who healed people and preached compelling messages about God's love.

When Jesus looked up in that tree and saw Zacchaeus, he saw a man deeply in need of saving. That is why Jesus tells Zacchaeus, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." I *must* stay at your house today. Jesus conveys a deep urgency. Why? Because when you see someone in need of saving, you don't delay. You don't say to the person being swept away in the river, "I'll rescue you tomorrow." You act at once.

Scripture does not tell us what Jesus said during his visit to Zacchaeus' house. But his presence alone, his willingness to enter this sinner's house, to dine at this sinner's table, to sleep in this sinner's guest room, was a massive gesture of grace. It was a gesture of love and forgiveness. When everyone else hated Zacchaeus and avoided him, when others criticized Jesus for going to Zacchaeus' house, Jesus chose—not to pull back—but to draw close with grace. And that grace was so powerful it carried with it transforming momentum. And it when it touched Zacchaeus, it changed him. And this greedy tax collector stands up and makes an announcement of radical restitution and reparations to those he had injured. Zacchaeus proclaims, "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." This is a radical transformation. Upon hearing his announcement, Jesus declares, "Today salvation has come to this house." A life was saved. A life was healed. A life was transformed.

Grace does not leave us the same. Grace saves us by transforming us. And that saving transformation has direct consequences for all of our relationships. Zacchaeus' transformation

involves taking action to heal the breach he has created between himself and his community. He is saved *from* greed and saved *for* relationships grounded in compassion and justice.

In the reading we heard today from the prophet Micah, God is upset with the people, especially those with power and wealth, because they have been exploiting the poor and the vulnerable. And so God reminds the people of an important moment when God showed them saving grace. God says, “Hey! You were slaves in Egypt and I saved you! Now, go and do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.” Do you see how the two are connected? This saving act of mercy is supposed to fuel a *response* in God’s people. Memory of this saving act of love is supposed to transform the people and their relationships with one another.

Grace carries with it momentum. It is supposed to effect a change in us. Some of our transformations might be personal in nature. God’s saving grace might mean we finally deal with our addictions to shopping or drinking, or with our anger. It might mean transforming our dispositions that have been too long grounded in complaining and negativity. Or maybe God’s grace means transforming your feelings of unworthiness and self-loathing and accepting God’s love for you.

But the transformation God’s grace brings about is not only personal in nature it also affects our relationships with others. That’s what happened to Zacchaeus. He was saved to live in right relationship with God and others. To be saved means we can never look at one another the same way again. To be saved means we can never again be indifferent to the sufferings of our neighbors or our possible culpability in that suffering. To be saved means we cannot ignore homelessness in our cities, or desperate migrants trying to find safe haven, or racist policies, or

food deserts in our cities. To be saved means we cannot blindly hate our enemy but must remember that they too are a broken child of God, a recipient of God's grace.

Remember, God says to us, remember how you were slaves to life-depleting forces—to resentments and divisions, to the obsession with the size of your investment funds, and how I saved you. Remember, God says to us, remember how you were held in captivity by your many possessions, and by the fear and hatred of those who are different, and how I saved you. Remember, God says to us, remember how you were in danger of being overwhelmed by the raging flood of selfishness and feelings worthlessness and by your own guilt and shame and how I saved you. Remember God's grace toward you and let the force of that grace throw you off balance and transform your life.