

## Laying out the welcome mat

Luke 19:1-10; Romans 4:1-3

When was the last time you were welcomed somewhere? Were you welcomed to a place you had never been before? Or maybe it was somewhere familiar, like into someone's home for a meal or a coffee and a visit? Were you welcomed into a new job, or place of education, or to group that you exercise with or sing with or play sports with or sew with? Or maybe it wasn't somewhere physical, maybe you were welcomed into the membership of something new, like retirement, or pet ownership, or owning a Mac product, or a particular stage of parenthood. We've been engaging in some big welcomes at Armour Heights: between today and last Sunday we welcomed 5 people into the family of God and promised to support them on their journeys in faith.

All of these forms of welcome are wonderful and make us feel accepted and valued. But I'm sure there have been times when we've experienced the opposite situation, too: feeling unwelcome. This is the situation Zacchaeus finds himself in. He is very much unwelcome within the community where he lives and works. And in some ways we might say this is justified. You see, Zacchaeus was a tax collector. And not any old tax collector, but *chief* tax collector, so he was very rich. And why was he rich? Well, he not only collected what was required by the Roman Empire but charged extra above that amount keep for himself. Jericho, the city where Zacchaeus did his tax collection, was a big city with many residents. This helps us get a sense of just how much superfluous wealth Zacchaeus had likely accumulated. And while Zacchaeus was Jewish, his fellow Jews simply could not accept him based on his actions; he wasn't taking money fairly, or even out of honest need, and he was thieving out of a desire to be wealthy, no matter the cost to those he took from. In their eyes, Zacchaeus was a nothing more than a sinner. And in identifying Zacchaeus in this way, they disliked and rejected him. The more Zacchaeus took, the higher up the ladder he climbed, the more he segregated himself from those around him. Zacchaeus may have been rich, but he was probably also quite lonely and isolated.

Perhaps this didn't bother Zacchaeus at first. Perhaps, as he climbed the social and wealth ladder he was so blinded by his newly acquired affluence that he didn't notice his old friends and colleagues slipping away. Then perhaps one day he turned around and discovered he was utterly alone. And maybe this began to eat away at him. Maybe he finally realized that money *can't* buy you happiness, or genuine friendship, or welcoming arms inviting you to come visit and eat and engage in the joys and hardships of life together. Maybe he was stuck living with this shame and loneliness and didn't know how to get out of it.

But then something happened. This man named Jesus came to Jericho. And Zacchaeus wanted to know more about him and what he had to say. His short stature kept him from being able to see Jesus over the crowd. Zacchaeus was desperate enough to see Jesus that he did something adults don't usually do: he climbed a tree. And as he passed below, Jesus looked up at Zacchaeus and told him to come down because he intended to eat with him at his house. Well, this is incredible for Zacchaeus! Here he was just hoping to observe Jesus, and now he gets the honour of hosting him for a meal and conversation! He immediately came down from the tree and happily welcomed Jesus.

And how did the crowd react? Well, they were pretty displeased. Of all the people who came to see Jesus that day, Jesus chose to eat with one of the most well-known crooks and cheats; one of the biggest sinners among them; one of the most self-centred, cruel elites who showed no true understanding of faith or love. How? How could Jesus look directly up at Zacchaeus, making a complete fool of himself in that tree, and feel compelled to eat with him?

Well, this is the thing with Jesus, isn't it? It's not enough for him to simply speak about radical acceptance, about welcoming those we would rather isolate and shame, he acts on it, too. Because, imagine this: Imagine Jesus saw Zacchaeus in that tree and said, "Hey Zacch, I've heard about what you're doing and I think you should change your ways. But no matter what you do, God already loves and accepts you." And Zacchaeus, a bit shocked to have been spotted in the tree and known by Jesus, gives a quick nod and an agreeable smile and that is that. Jesus moves on, the crowd follows, and whether Zacchaeus changes his ways or not is far from the front of the crowd's mind. They move on with their day and think nothing more about Zacchaeus, except maybe to rejoice that Jesus made an example of him.

But here's what's important about the way things actually happened: Zacchaeus came down from that tree and welcomed Jesus. And the crowd grumbled. Loudly. No one was trying to hide their disgust or disappointment around the situation. After all, this man was an honest-to-goodness sinner. What good would it do to accept him or to honour this crook by eating with him? Zacchaeus knew what was happening. And so he used this moment to share something new about himself that the crowd didn't know before: he was transformed. Alone and shamed, isolated from the community and devoid of true friendship, companionship, and the daily experience of love and acceptance, Zacchaeus probably had an urge to change for a while now but couldn't do it all on his own. It was too big a wound to heal without support, without friends. And now, here's Jesus, telling him by way of welcoming him into a meal and a conversation and through radical acceptance and by extending grace, that there is a way out of where he is. There is an opportunity to transform his heart, to receive forgiveness, to heal from his shame and isolation. And Zacchaeus grabs onto this opportunity, making his intentions public. He

says aloud, so those around him can hear, “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” (v.8).

To repent is to make a change in direction. Zacchaeus had been focused on getting up that wealth ladder, and now he turns around and, with his heart in the right place, he makes a change. He comes down from that ladder—and quite literally down from his high place in a tree—and states his intention to turn his life around, to turn away from sin and toward God. But there’s more to this story than just Zacchaeus’ repentance.

The community that surrounded Zacchaeus had, for some time, viewed him in a specific way: a sinner. How could they come to trust this man ever again after everything he had taken from them? Plus, he worked for the much despised Roman Empire. So now, they see Jesus welcome this man, openly accepting him and honouring him; they hear Zacchaeus explain how he will not only give back what he’s taken, but pay back four times as much, and how he will let go of his wealth to help the poor. But can they truly trust him? Can they come to accept him the way Jesus does? Can they welcome him back into the community and build relationships and maybe even friendships with him? It would be easier to keep treating him the way they always have, by isolating him, snubbing him, expecting very little from him in terms of the productive life of the community.

Jesus shows the crowd that day what grace is really all about and, in the way that Jesus does, makes the crowd re-think their biases against Zacchaeus, challenging them to extend grace and offer radical acceptance themselves. You see, after Zacchaeus announces the ways he plans to pay back what he stole and help the poor, Jesus also makes a public announcement. While he directs these words to Zacchaeus, the crowd is still present to hear Jesus say, “Today salvation has come to this house, because [Zacchaeus] too is a son of Abraham.” (v.9) Salvation has come to Zacchaeus. And, yes, part of that salvation is in Zacchaeus personally turning around and atoning for his sins, looking for a way out of his old life and into a new life, moving toward wholeness. But what if salvation also comes from some folks in the crowd being able to see Zacchaeus’ new way of living in the world? What if those gathered can now be inspired by his transformation? Perhaps now they can examine their own lives and consider ways that they might move out of their own brokenness and toward greater wholeness, as well.

Jesus also says something that probably helped Zacchaeus be accepted back into his Jewish community. He says that “[Zacchaeus] too is a son of Abraham.” As we heard in our scripture passage from the book of Romans today, what really set Abraham apart was that he trusted God and entered into what God was doing for him. Abraham didn’t act based on God’s expectations of him, he acted based on what God was already doing

in and through and for him. He trusted God to guide him on the journey. When Jesus says that Zacchaeus is a son of Abraham, we think to Abraham's trust in God and realize that Jesus sees a transformation in Zacchaeus that sets him in line with Abraham: Zacchaeus trusts God to guide him; he has entered into what God is doing for him. This is his turning point. God extends grace and makes sure Zacchaeus knows he is welcome in the family of God.

We need that kind of grace and welcome in our lives. Haven't we all done things, even seemingly small things, that have shut others out, even when we knew we should invite them in?

Nadia Bolz-Weber is a Lutheran pastor who tells a story just like this in her book called *Accidental Saints: finding God in all the wrong places*. A new potential member arrives at her church one Sunday and Nadia feels like maybe he's the kind of person who is more interested in being friends with her than actually being a member of the community. She gets a weird vibe from the guy and finds that she, both intentionally and unintentionally, finds ways to keep him at arm's length. She shows him less warmth than she would other new members to the church. She even confesses that she purposely left him off an email list about an upcoming church retreat. And then the man, named Larry, dies quite suddenly from a brain tumour and Nadia ends up presiding over his memorial service. This, unsurprisingly, sends waves of guilt over her and she confesses to a friend about how unfriendly she was and how she never took the time to actually get to know Larry. Her friend assures her of God's forgiveness and mercy, even for a pastor! After the memorial service, a family member comes to Nadia and tells her how much her church meant to Larry and how welcome he felt there.

Nadia goes on to write, "I will never know Larry. I'll never know what it is like to love him, to see him, to know what the source of his tenderness towards his wife was or from where he drew his strength in his final days. That is all lost to me. But for some reason our congregation was a place of comfort for him. Sometimes God needs stuff done, even though I can be a real [jerk]. There is absolutely no justice in the fact that Larry loved me and our church. But if I got what I deserved in this life, I'd be screwed, so instead I receive grace for what it is, a gift." (p. 19, *Accidental Saints: Finding God in all the Wrong Places*). God shows up in unexpected places and in unexpected people and transforms us in unexpected ways.

The crowd surrounding Zacchaeus that day thought they knew who was "in" and who was "out." And that "us verses them" aspect of life continues to permeate into minds and hearts still today. Maybe some of the crowd just couldn't imagine Zacchaeus ever really changing and continued to treat him as an outsider. But maybe some of them were moved by what Zacchaeus said, saw him coming down from that tree, that social ladder,

heard what he said, heard what Jesus said, and found it in themselves to let go of judgmental righteousness. Perhaps they saw that in forgiving they could help Zacchaeus move forward and heal, but also free themselves from the bitterness, resentment, and callousness that burdened their own hearts, receiving the unexpected gift of grace for themselves, too. Perhaps salvation came through community members extending grace and laying out their welcome mats once more.

How can we practice being more open to grace in our lives? How can we move away from bitterness and judgement and toward new life? How can we focus more on welcoming and radical acceptance rather than categorizing one another, whether politically or socially or even theologically? It comes down to our ability and our faithful desire to stand up for what Christ opens our eyes and our hearts to: seeing “the other” as a fellow human; someone broken, flawed, and beautiful—just like us. And when we do make judgements, because inevitably there will come a time where we will, we have a choice: stay the course, or reorient ourselves as quickly and often as we can. We can turn away from those judgements we hold onto, embrace grace (as much for ourselves as for anyone else), and turn back to God, the source of our being and the source of our love.

So, let’s lay out the welcome mat and invite the unexpected one; the one who may seem like an outsider, but whom God sees as beloved. Let’s find God in all the wrong people, all the wrong places, all the wrong moments. It may bring salvation to not just the houses of others, but to our own, as well.

And let’s welcome God, even when our homes feel messy and we feel unprepared. Because the truth is, God is going to show up anyway, extending grace and sharing love. God will get into those places in our lives and in our society that we try to avoid. May we, in those unexpected and holy places, find healing and wholeness. Amen.