

Fruit Worthy of Repentance

Luke 19:1-10

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost, (Oct. 30) 2022

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Bear fruit worthy of repentance.

-John the Baptist,

Luke 3:8

We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people.

-Martin Luther King, Jr.,

“Letter from a Birmingham Jail”

Old buildings need constant work. They need to be looked after and paid attention to in order to see what else needs to be done. It's never-ending.

A couple of years ago we learned that our church building roof structure was sagging, and the exterior walls were bulging outwards. We had to rebuild and restructure.

Last week at my home place preparing for Callie's wedding, we were reminded of the chronic condition of repairs and maintenance. The 50-year-old septic system was not prepared for the crowd. It all worked out, but we had to have learned once more that tending to an old house never stops: water lines, sewer lines, plumbing, electrical wiring, a leaky roof, and on and on. It never stops.

Isabel Wilkerson, Pulitzer Prize winning author uses the analogy of an old house in her extraordinary book, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*. She says, “We in the developed world are like homeowners who inhabited a house on a piece of land that is beautiful on the outside, but whose soil is unstable loam and rock, heaving and contracting over generations, cracks patched but the deeper ruptures waved away for decades, centuries even... but here we are, the current occupants of the property with stress cracks and bowed walls and fissures built into the foundation. We are the heirs to whatever is right or wrong with it... Unaddressed, the ruptures and diagonal cracks will not fix themselves.”

She goes on, “When people live in an old house, they come to adjust to the idiosyncrasies and outright dangers skulking in an old structure. They put buckets under a wet ceiling, prop up groaning floors, learn to step over that rotting wood tread in the staircase. The awkward becomes acceptable, and the unacceptable becomes merely inconvenient. Live with it long enough, and the unthinkable becomes normal. Exposed over generations, we learn to believe that the incomprehensible is the way life is supposed to be” (p. 15).

The gospel reminds us that sagging floors and bulging walls, racism and poverty, violence and destruction of Creation is not the way it is supposed to be. We gather every Sunday to remember and tell the truth of what normal is supposed to be. Every Sunday we pay truthful attention to our “old house” and take responsibility for it. When we looked up at the cracks in our ceiling, we knew we had to do more than repaint. Something deeper, something structural might be wrong. Which proved to be the truth. Left unaddressed over time, the cracks would have become worse until the whole structure would have become untenable.

Sunday morning worship is remembering, confessing, and telling the truth about where we live. We read the truth, tell the truth, remember the truth, and confess our failure to live the truth. We call it sin.

An American individualistic understanding of sin says, “I personally did not cause the cracks. I only confess what I individually did.” That’s superficial and inadequate. Christian teaching is that sin is something we’re in and not just what we do. It is pervasive and systemic, comprehensive across generations. It is bigger and older than just my own individual life. The historic terminology is Original Sin. So, we gather and corporately confess things we have done and things we have left undone. We confess what we participate in. We confess that we are apathetic or blind or in denial about our old house and we want to have our eyes opened and repent. We want to fix the house and this old house is always in need of fixing, so we gather every Sunday to work on it.

A few years ago, I was in a meeting in Dallas on Race, and a well-meaning White woman said to me, “It’s time to get over it and move on.” That’s the equivalent to saying, “Let’s slap some paint on it and move on.”

Our reading from Luke this morning is about Zacchaeus who refused to say, “It’s time to get over it and move on.”

Luke tells us that Jesus was traveling through Jericho and there was a man named Zacchaeus who was chief tax collector and rich. To be a tax collector in the Bible is no small matter. In the Bible, especially the New Testament, tax collecting is perhaps the most immoral job there is! When you read tax collector (sometimes called publican), think a combination of mafia and drug-dealing. It was rooted in abuse, coercion, and corruption.

The Roman Empire taxed the water, the city, food, roads, houses, the Temple, crops, livestock, sales taxes on goods bought and sold, and what was called a frontier tax which meant if you lived in an outlying province like Judea, you paid additional taxes for the housing, upkeep, and feeding of the Roman troops posted in your province, as well as additional taxes for infrastructure and maintenance. And all this fell most heavily in the Roman system on those who actually worked the land, the peasants, and the tenant farmers. It is interesting that in the Greek system the wealthy bore most of the cost of government, while in the Roman system the tax burden was shifted out to the provinces to the small landowners, while the wealthy Roman citizen paid little or no taxes (see Pheme Perkins, "Taxes in the New Testament," *Journal of Religious Ethics*, Fall 1984, p. 182).

The get a job as a tax collector meant bidding on it. The highest bidder got the job. Once you had the job, you were set. Rome didn't care how you collected the tax or how much you collected as long as they got theirs. Therefore, the tax collectors could charge whatever they wanted, send Rome their share, and pocket the rest. Roman soldiers went along with the tax collector as his muscle, and when the people couldn't pay the tax, the tax collector would loan the amount to the person unable to pay, converting the tax into a private debt. And like Pay-Day lending, the tax collector would charge an unbelievable and unjust interest rate. The person had to pay the debt with interest or be hauled away to Roman justice, losing their land and possessions to the tax collector.

To be a chief tax collector like Zacchaeus meant that you were over other tax collectors and you extracted extra fees and profits from them on top of whatever else you brought in. To say that he was rich was an understatement. The Jewish people loathed him. He was corrupt and abusive plus he worked for the

hated Romans against his own people. He was cut-off, ostracized from the synagogue even if he had wanted to attend, which he did not. No one spoke to him or had anything to do with him. When we learned as children that Zacchaeus was a “wee little man” who could not see Jesus, part of the story is that no one helped him, assisted him, or made room for him.

Luke says that Zacchaeus ran ahead of the crowd and climbed up a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus. When Jesus comes along, he calls Zacchaeus by name, which means that Jesus knew who he was. He knew what he did and all that it meant. Remember that one of the first disciples Jesus called was Levi, who was a publican or tax collector, who was also known as Matthew, so, Jesus knew tax collectors.

I’ve always thought it was interesting and instructive that another of Jesus’s disciples was known as Simon the Zealot. I mention this because a zealot was one who hated the Roman Empire and violently fought to free Judea from it. They specialized in assassinations and ambushes, not so much ambushing Roman soldiers but Roman officials or tax collectors working for Rome. To put it directly, zealots hated with a perfect hatred tax collectors and tax collectors returned the hatred.

So here, among Jesus’ twelve disciples were two men, Matthew the tax collector and Simon the Zealot, drawn from the extreme opposites of the politics of the day, who hated each other, but in Christ, they were being drawn together as one new humanity. No doubt it took a while and no doubt it involved many long discussions late into the night, much of them heated. But they stayed with it. Jesus didn’t give up on them and they didn’t give up on Jesus or each other.

So Jesus comes along and calls Zacchaeus by name and announces for all to hear, “Hurry down out of that tree, for I’m staying at your house today.” Wow! This is big! This is controversial. Jesus is going to stay with perhaps the most hated man in Jericho.

But it is also the gospel happening right there. No one is beyond hope. No one has to be defined in life by their past. Redemption is possible for anyone and everyone, not because Zacchaeus is deep down a nice guy, but because Christ Jesus deep down is the incarnate God, the Word made flesh among us, the very definition of love, mercy, and grace.

And though Zacchaeus is a mean and ruthless man, or else he would not have been a chief tax collector and rich, in the presence of Jesus, something is going on with him that causes him to open his arms to Jesus and be received by Jesus with hospitality. Perhaps he is trying to manipulate Jesus or make it all about himself and boast in front of Jericho. Maybe so. But whatever is going on with him, he got more than he bargained for. The citizens of Jericho are angry, but Zacchaeus is used to that. What’s he not used to is Jesus.

Zacchaeus is confronted with God face to face in Jesus and therefore he is faced with change. He is called to repent. I wonder if Zacchaeus started off excited that the local celebrity was going to stay at his house, but now Christ is calling him to radical change, to transformation, to repentance with not only personal implications but also social ramifications. His sin is personal, but it is also social, and so is his repentance. His sin affected everyone in Jericho, so his repentance had to be more than just his personal relationship with Jesus. In the presence of Christ Jesus everything is turned upside-down, right-side up and he no longer must live in shame. The toxic cycles of his sin, which has been going on for a long time,

and a system of sin which has been going on for generations, suddenly comes to a stop. In the presence of Jesus, he must face the truth of the house he lives in, and he knows that putting on a new coat of paint is not enough.

Zacchaeus responds, “Lord, today. As of right now, I’m giving away half of my possessions to the poor. And for anyone I’ve defrauded, I pay back four times as much!” (Luke 19:8). Zacchaeus knew that simply saying, “I’m sorry, Lord. I’m a sinner, please forgive me,” was insufficient. He also knew what the cumulative effect of his oppression had on the families in Jericho, so he publicly committed himself to paying reparations.

His sin was more than just the individual people he had directly cheated and abused. It rippled throughout the community, creating patterns of debt, poverty, and abuse that had to be atoned for. He supervised and engaged in systemic sin, so his repentance is doing what he can to break these cycles of injustice and trauma by enacting economic transformation within the community he abused. He paid reparations, which is, of course, related to the word repair. The system was broken, abusive, and guilty, and Zacchaeus was complicitous. Reparation was and is an effort to bring about repairs. Reparation does not resolve everything, but it is an effort to break the toxic system and bring about healing.

This is when Jesus proclaims Zacchaeus is saved. “Today, salvation has come to this house! Zacchaeus is too a son of Abraham!” (19:9). Getting saved is not simply giving your heart to Jesus. Zacchaeus shows us that getting saved has to do with joining in with the repair and healing of the world. Salvation is atonement – at-one-ment. Salvation has to do with making whole.

When Jesus declares Zacchaeus a son of Abraham, he is saying, “He is now part of the covenant community. No longer cut-off, dismembered from God and

God's community. Now he is re-membered and re-integrated into God and God's community. He is being made whole."

Back in Luke 3, old John the Baptist denounced tax collectors. Luke says tax collectors came out to John asking him, "What should we do?" And John said, "Collect no more than the proper and just amount. And you and the soldiers, quit extorting money from people by threatening them and making false accusations against them" (Luke 3:12-14).

John said, "Bear fruit worthy of repentance!" (3:8). In other words, repentance should match the sin for which you are repenting. And when our eyes are opened to how sick the system is, we learn to work to transform the system, to repair what is broken. Often it means to speak up and speak out, and call the brokenness what it is. Hear the truth. Confess when we fall short of the truth. Tell the truth. Speak the truth.

In 2018, when Bryan Stevenson and the Equal Justice Initiative opened the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, AL (popularly known as the National Lynching Memorial and Museum), - which by the way, we need to make a church trip there. I don't know what it would take, but I'd like to start talking about it. Anyway, when the museum was being opened in an effort to open our eyes to the brokenness in our history, the local newspaper, *The Montgomery Advertiser*, complained to him that they knew he would talk to *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, but he would not talk to them. So, Stevenson said, "Let's have a conversation about that."

They began a dialogue in which Stevenson showed them their coverage of lynchings which had taken place in Montgomery the first half of the twentieth century. The newspaper had encouraged the violence and glorified it. Stevenson

said, “If you ask me why I don’t trust you, it’s rooted in my knowledge of this history.”

And to the newspaper’s credit, they looked at their coverage clearly and squarely and said, “We did not know this. We have to apologize.” So, on the day the museum opened, the front page had a massive headline apologizing for their role in contributing to racial terror and lynchings.

There are many other stories of confession of sin and repentance and reparation. Georgetown University in Washington D.C., in 2019 after the student body voted to tax themselves so they could offer reparations to the descendants of enslaved people who had been sold to keep the college going almost two centuries ago, the University committed to give \$400,000 a year for community projects such as health clinics and schools.

So, Austin Heights, what does all this mean to us? What does bearing fruit worthy of repentance look for us, for you and for me? I can’t answer that right now. But I do know that every Sunday, we gather to look at our old building and see what needs to be done. The work is never done.

Oftentimes, when confronted with the work of repair over and over, we get tired. White fatigue is what it is sometimes called – racism, violence, democracy falling apart, climate change, and on and on. It gets to be too much.

But I remember something else from Bryan Stevenson. He said he was raised in church where every Sunday you were confronted with another vision, another way of seeing the world. “And you get oriented to live like that, to think like that, to believe like that.” He said, “I’m a product of a community where

marginalized, poor, and excluded people had to learn to believe things we hadn't seen."

Let's keep on keeping on being a community of faith in Christ, where every Sunday, every day we see things we've never seen before and believe things we've never dreamed of before. God is at work repairing this world.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.