

To Seek and To Save the Lost

Luke 19: 1-10

H. Stephen Shoemaker

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The story of Zaccheus has been rumbling around in my head since I was a little kid. I was taught the song:

Zaccheus was a wee little man

And a wee little man was he.

He climbed up in a sycamore tree

For the Lord he wanted to see.

And when the Savior passed that way

He looked up in the tree,

And he said, "Zaccheus, you come down!"

For I'm going to your house today!

For I'm going to your house today!

Now, the way the song was taught me, it got the inflection wrong in Jesus' words.

Not the demanding "You come down!" but the joyful "Come on down!"

So we shall see.

I

Jesus was on his way toward his final week in Jerusalem when he passed through Jericho.

Enter Zaccheus. His name meant literally “pure” or “blameless”—which was like naming your white poodle “Blackie”. He is described as a “tax-collector—which meant he was a Jewish traitor and cheat. He is described as “chief” tax-collector—which meant he was high up in the corrupt and oppressive tax-system of Rome. And he was “rich” –which meant he had become cruelly proficient in robbing his people. He was a notoriously corrupt man. When people saw him what arose in their throats like a bad taste in their mouths was disgust.

But Zaccheus, in the words of Luke, “sought to see who Jesus was”! Did he feel some lostness in his soul? He must have heard enough about Jesus to be curious, and curiosity can be the first step to conversion. “Could this man patch up this hole in my soul?”

So off he went to the main street in town to see Jesus riding in. When he got there, it was like Macy’s parade on Thanksgiving Day. Now here comes the indelible detail. Because of the size of the crowd, and because he was small in

stature, he was stymied. Then up the sycamore tree he scampered, becoming as a child, to see Jesus.

Remember when Jesus said, “Unless you change and become as children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven? (Matthew 18:2) What *kind* of change did he have in mind? Not innocence. But rather this: *full-out wonder* and *full-out need*. A mind open to wonder and a willingness to offer your need to God.

Zaccheus scampered up the tree and readied himself for the kingdom of God. Up in the tree he might have thought: This is a good place to *see*, and this is a good place to *hide*. No one will see me here.

II

But Jesus saw him; he spied the unlikely sight of a grown man up in a tree. He came over to him. Everything grew quiet. What would Jesus say to him? A denunciation of his collaboration with Rome? A quick sermon on the lure of riches? No. what he said was: “Zaccheus, hurry down from that tree; I’m going to your house today.” Not a scolding, “Zaccheus, you come down!” but a joyful, “Come on down!”

The townspeople were not pleased. They murmured: “He has gone in to be the guest of a *sinner*!” this is a corrupt man. He is robbing from the poor to make riches for himself. (This man was easy to villainize.)

But here's the thing: every time we think we have Jesus figured out he keeps surprising us. Every time we make out the guest list for who belongs, here comes Jesus with some more leaves for the table. It is growing longer and longer. It is for you too.

Jesus had a special heart for the poor. We see this all through Luke. But he loved rich people too. Salvation can also come to the house of a rich person!

Remember when Jesus said: "How hard it is for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God? It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." O to paraphrase, "It is easier for a BMW to go through the night deposit slot at Blue Harbor bank than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." The disciples caught the force of the hyperbole. "Well then it is impossible!" and Jesus delivered the punch line: "What is impossible for us is possible with God."

The crowd watched, their mouths agape, as Jesus strolled arm in arm with Zaccheus to his house. The Divine Friendship was working its holy power in Zaccheus.

Before the meal was even finished, Zaccheus stood up and announced: Lord, half of all I have I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything I will restore it fourfold!

Fourfold?! All the Jewish law required was principal plus 20%. Half of all he owned to the poor?! Restoration at 400%?! This is what salvation does. It goes beyond. He is moved from arithmetic into love.

The servants in the room probably fainted on the spot. His wife may have said to herself, “There goes the vacation house on the Mediterranean!” But maybe this was what she had been secretly praying for. Walter Rauschenbusch the Baptist pastor/theologian who became the father of the Social Gospel movement in America, captured the moment this way: “A camel passed through the eye of the needle, and Jesus stood and cheered!”

What Jesus said was: “*Today* salvation has come to this house.” Then he called him “son of Abraham”, restoring him to sonship as a child of God.

Can we enter into the joy of this moment? Can we leave the murmuring crowd and join in the joyful feast? I remember, to my shame, how I scoffed at the conversion of Chuck Colson who was part of the Nixon circle who was put in prison for Watergate crimes. How wrong I was. What a difference Colson has made in so many lives, especially through his *Prison Fellowship* ministry.

III

Then Jesus said, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” O, the divine Initiative! Jesus seeks us out.

There are many ways to be lost. Lost in doubt and lost in one's certainty, lost in sin and lost in one's certainty, lost in sin and lost in one's righteousness, lost in hopelessness, loneliness and confusion, lost in the powerlessness of addiction, lost in apathy, boredom and purposelessness, lost in a thousand distractions and lost inside oneself. Lost far from home and lost close to home. And Jesus seeks them all, us all.

The Swiss theologian Karl Barth described salvation this way; "God sent his son into the far country of earth to find us and lead us home."

And yes there are many ways to be saved. Here are some.

-Deliverance, deliverance from danger, oppression, sin and death.

-Healing, of body, mind and spirit.

-Forgiveness of all our sins, not some, *all*.

-Reconciliation, with God and your own true self.

-Wholeness, being divided no more. The Jewish word is Shalom, peace, another word for salvation.

-A transformed life, say as with Zaccheus!

We have seen all these kinds of salvation in Luke.

IV

And it's all grace. Grace every moment of our days—whether we see it or not. The grace that has sought us out that we may become what God had created us to be. Martin Buber, the great Jewish philosopher wrote that the whole Bible can be summed up in this: “God in search of us.”

Yes, we seek God too! But grace has prepared the way. Some theologians call this “prevenient grace”, the grace that goes before. The old hymn captures it all:

I sought the Lord

And afterward I knew

He moved my soul to seek Him, seeking me.

It was not I that found, O Savior true;

No, I was found of Thee.

St. Augustine is not everybody's favorite theologian, principally because of his doctrine of “Original Sin” which has pervaded Western Christianity. But his spirituality was profound and his conversion a wonder. He lived a wild unruly youth. He fathered a child out of wedlock with a woman who was his concubine. When he decided to set sail from Africa and go to Rome his mother, Monica, a

fervent Christian, fervently prayed that he not go to Rome. She feared it would be his final ruin. But he went, and in Milan he heard the sermon of Ambrose and became a Christian. The deeper intent of her prayers was answered.

In his spiritual classic, *Confessions*, every word is written as a prayer to God. Here is a wonderful passage.

So late did I love you, beauty so ancient, so new... See, you were there within me, and I was in the external world looking for you there. You called you shouted, you shattered my deafness; you shone with dazzling light and dispelled my blindness; you were fragrant and I breathed in deeply and now am breathless with longing for you.

To seek and to save the lost.

Simone Weil, the remarkable 20th century French spiritual writer, grew up in an agnostic Jewish home. From her young life she displayed the most tender conscience. As a school girl she would not wear socks because the children of factory workers had no socks to wear with their shoes. She stopped eating sugar because French soldiers fighting in the front had no sugar to eat.

She went on to the University to get her degree, became a teacher and joined the Socialist Workers movement. Then she suffered a kind of breakdown

and went to convalesce in a monastery in Spain, not because she was religious, but because she needed a place of complete rest.

There she met a British priest who introduced her to the mystical poetry of George Herbert, British parson and poet. She suffered migraine headaches, and when they came she would sooth herself with his poetry. Then one day as she was reciting his poem, “Love Bade Me Welcome”, “without knowing it the recitation took on the virtue of a prayer” and “Christ came down and took possession of me.”

The poem began with the words: “Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back/ Guilty of dust and sin.” Love tenderly imploringly kept inviting him to the table. Finally Love broke through. “You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat.” Then the final line: “So I did sit and eat”¹

So Love bids us all to the table of Love.

“The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” He is seeking still. In the next two weeks we shall see how far his love will go.

1. George Herbert, “Love III” *The Country Parson, The Temple* (N.Y.: Paulist Press, 1981), p. 316.

See also, Augustine, *Confessions*. See Peter Brown, Augustine of Hippo.

And Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, (N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1951)

