

“THE OTHER SIDE OF ANGER”

November 2, 2025 Luke 19: 1-10
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We might easily have called these two sermons – last week and this week – a tale of two tax collectors.

Last week, you will recall, the tax collector was lonely and alone, miserable, guilt ridden and repentant. He was the product of fiction, the main character in a parable that Jesus made up and told to make a point.

This week we have another tax collector. This one is a real person who is rich and successful. He is comfortable with his life and not at all inclined to repentance. And yet, confronted by the grace of God – what Martin Luther referred to as “God’s white-hot furnace of love,” he finds his life changed almost in spite of himself.

His name is Zacchaeus.

BARTIMAEUS

Oh, my Lord, how they hated that little man.

And with good reason. He was a weasel and a rat fink. He was a shill for the Romans. He collected their idolatrous, oppressive taxes for them and...

But I’m getting ahead of myself. Let’s go to the beginning of the story, shall we? Let’s take a close look at the narrative, not the way we remember it but the way Luke tells it for it is uniquely Luke’s. It appears only in his gospel. Matthew, Mark and John either do not know of it or thought that it was not worth including.

Luke, however, finds it important enough to tell and place prominently in his gospel account. And scholars tell us that the way he tells it is as important as the tale itself. Let’s take a look:

By way of introduction, Luke has just finished telling us a story about Jesus’ encounter with a blind man named Bartimaeus. He is just about to enter the city of Jericho when his entourage passes a blind beggar. Just a quick synopsis of the story tells us that Bartimaeus hears the crowd passing and enquires what’s going on.

They tell him that it is Jesus of Nazareth and, upon hearing that, he calls out to Jesus and asks him to take pity on him. The people in the crowd are a little put off by this unseemly display of emotion and they tell him to hush but Jesus has the Bartimaeus brought to him. What, he asks him, do you want me to do for you?

Bartimaeus says, I want to be able to see. Jesus says, “Receive your sight; your faith has made you well.” Bartimaeus joins the entourage and everyone is shocked and amazed.

And then, immediately, we find ourselves in the city itself.

ZACCHAEUS

Luke begins this present story by telling us that Jesus was passing through Jericho.

Think of it this way: If Jerusalem was the Washington, D.C. of that time Jericho was the New York City. Jericho was the biggest city in the area and the oldest. Founded sometime between 10,000 and 9,000 BCE, Jericho was an ancient city when Jesus walked through it. It was so old that Jesus would have had to walk around the archeological digs. Today it is considered the oldest continuously occupied city in the world.

And it was huge! Estimates put its population in Jesus' time at right around 100,000 people, up from about 3,000 when Joshua first entered and conquered the city in about 1,400 BCE. It has been destroyed by war, by earthquake, by fire and it has been rebuilt every time. It is a big, bustling, commercial city full of people of all kinds from all over the eastern world at that time. But Jesus is just passing through on his way to Jerusalem.

Now Jesus was a sort of minor of a celebrity by the time this story takes place so he has drawn something of a crowd. No doubt he was walking slowly, talking and teaching as was his custom.

Luke tells us, there was a man living in Jericho at that time whose name was Zacchaeus. It also tells us three things about Zacchaeus and leaves us to infer some others.

One, he was a "chief tax collector." Two, he was rich. Three, he was short. What can we infer from these descriptions?

Well, we know that the Roman system of collecting taxes was one that invited and was riddled with corruption. It was set up as a sort of pyramid scheme. Tax collectors were chosen from the native population. Usually they purchased a sort of franchise that allowed them to collect taxes for a certain area.

Each area had a tax collector and there was a supervisor over several areas and a chief tax collector over the entire region or city. The chief tax collector got a cut from every tax collector and supervisor under him. How much was that, you ask?

The basic Roman tax was a one percent income tax which, no doubt, sounds pretty good to most of us. But there were also taxes on goods, produce, land, imports and exports. There were also road and bridge tolls, user taxes for various public buildings, sir charges, collection fees, late fees, penalties and interest.

Tax collectors collected all of these and received a percentage of what they collected as did their supervisors and the chief tax collector. Zacchaeus was a "chief tax collector," probably the chief tax collector for the entire city of Jericho. So, it goes without saying that he was rich.

I think we have made it clear in our discussions of tax collectors in first century Israel that they were, as a group, hated and reviled by their fellow Jews. They were shiftless shills, collaborators, and turncoats. They got rich off the misery of their own people and they had no

incentive to cut anyone any slack. Any credit or leniency that they gave to anyone meant a reduction in their own pay. Any kindness they showed came out of their own pocket.

They were, as a group, friendless and despised. And last week we saw the toll that hatred took on one tax collector. Zacchaeus, however, is rich. This means a couple of things to those earliest readers of Luke's gospel.

One, it means that Zacchaeus was good at what he did. He was efficient and unforgiving. He went about his collections and his supervision of the other tax collectors in Jericho with a grim determination and an unyielding resolution. He was not afraid to twist arms or make threats.

Secondly, it means that he was comfortable. In fact, he was probably overweight. In the Roman Empire, you see, wealth and corpulence often went together with one being the proof of the other. Being fat and comfortable, he was not inclined to change. Why should he? He had everything a man could want except friends and if no one wanted to be his friend he could buy some more slaves and imagine them to be kindred spirits. If his lack of friends and the absence of the respect of his peers pained him he managed to anesthetize it with his not inconsiderable wealth.

Finally, Luke tells us that he was short. I'm not going to try to psychoanalyze Zacchaeus and tell you what impact his diminutive stature had on his psyche or even suggest that he may have been a short, little, fat guy who was, through his chosen career, overcompensating in some way.

I would never suggest such a thing. That would be out of my area of expertise. I'm just saying...

Zacchaeus sees a crowd gathering and, no doubt, hears the name "Jesus." He's probably heard the name before. Maybe he's even heard some of the rumors about this guy, Jesus, that he's a healer or that he is a friend of publicans and tax collectors. (One of his inner circle of disciples, a guy named Levi, is, himself, a former tax collector, after all. And Jesus stayed at his home and was willing to undergo criticism for doing so.)

Or, maybe not. Maybe Zacchaeus is just curious about this Jesus guy who can draw such a crowd by the power of his teaching, and he decides to take a look, get the measure of the man. So, he goes to where the crowd has gathered but, seeing him coming, and hating him, the crowd closes ranks.

He moves, they move. He tries to get through, they tighten up. He tries to squeeze through, they lock him out. They hate him and they do this because it's all they have. It's a small thing, a petty thing, really, but it's a way to thumb your nose at authority, to mess with "the man." And mess they do. They block his view. They obscure his vision. He cannot see. For all practical purposes, he is as blind as Bartimaeus.

Finally, exhausted from trying to get through or see through the crowd, Zacchaeus runs ahead and climbs up into a tree – a sycamore or a fig tree, depending on your translation. (Actually, it was both. *Ficus Sycomorus*. A smallish but sturdy evergreen with widely spaced

branches perfect for climbing, it produces an inferior quality fig that was mostly bought and eaten by the poor.)

What glee this spectacle must have given the crowd.

Adult, Jewish men neither ran nor climbed. It would have been considered undignified. Certainly rich, important men didn't climb trees in front of other people. Such behavior would have been considered humiliating and, no doubt, there was much tittering and snickering and pointing of fingers in the crowd that day.

Either he doesn't notice or he doesn't care. He is either so anxious, so driven, maybe so desperate to see Jesus that he doesn't care about the ridicule and laughter of the crowd or he has grown so calloused to their hatred and criticism that it no longer bothers him. Or maybe it's a little of both.

JESUS

Jesus sees Zacchaeus in the tree.

You cannot see Jesus – really see him – without being seen by him. His presence measures us. His gaze judges us. His voice convicts us. His hand beckons us.

Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.

Students of literature know that the story is in the verbs and Luke is no mean student of literature. Hurry. Come. Must. Stay.

Hurry. There is no time to waste. This is not a time for dilly-dallying. Move it, son. Time's a wastin'. How we love to put Jesus off. Yes, Lord, I know you want me to be like you but right now I'm so busy. The kids need me. The bills have to be paid. My parents are getting old. I have to finish my degree. I'm on a fixed income.

To tell you the truth, it's a lot more comfortable up here on this limb so if it's all the same to you I'll just stay up in this tree and watch you as...you...pass...by...

Come. Come down. Get down here. What are you thinking? You look like a fool. Christianity is not a spectator sport. We aren't allowed to wear the uniform and sit on the bench. We are all expected to play, to get into the game, to sweat and bleed for victory.

Several years ago, I directed a play called "Twelve Angry Men." You may be familiar with the story. It's about a jury and all of the characters are on the stage through the entire play. It is the most perfectly realized ensemble piece you ever saw because there are, literally, no stars.

And yet, the hardest part of directing this play with high school actors was keeping them, "in the play." If their character wasn't speaking they would let their minds wander or start thinking about other things and when it came time for them to say a line they would suddenly wake up, completely lost.

Stay in character, I would yell at them. Get in the play. Don't just sit there, react! And thus, speaks Jesus to Zacchaeus: Come down here. Get in the game. Do something.

I **must stay** at your house, today. Not, I think I'll stay. Not, would it be okay if... Not, I want to stay. Not, how would it be if I stayed. No, it's: I must stay.

It is not an option; It must happen. Jesus is compelled by his calling and his identity to stay at this man's house, to bring to him, personally and individually, the good news of salvation, of God's grace and love.

THE CROWD

Zacchaeus literally leaps from the tree and welcomes Jesus to his home.

But the crowd is not happy. *What's up with this?* He comes to this big city where there are plenty of people who are hurting and in need, who are sick and injured, who are desperate, poor and hopeless. And who does Jesus choose to visit? The richest, meanest, most hateful, little weasel in the whole town.

Yeah, thanks for nothing, "savior."

No doubt Zacchaeus hears the grumbling of the crowd, and he desires to show them that his repentance is genuine, that he really does intend to change his life. This quick, close encounter with Jesus has had that big of an effect on him.

But it hasn't had that kind of effect on them, the crowd. They don't understand. Their lives haven't been changed so it follows that no one else's life can be changed either, right?

Zacchaeus spontaneously offers to give half of everything he owns to the poor. (Big deal, right? Half of ten million still leaves five million.) But then he goes even further. He offers to pay back anyone that he has defrauded. The law required the amount you have stolen plus twenty percent if you come forth voluntarily. If you are brought before the judge and found guilty the amount jumps to the amount you stole plus 100 percent. Only in the most heinous and punitive of cases, say where you've stolen from a widow or a poor person, does the law allow for triple indemnity but never quadruple.

Zacchaeus offers to go far beyond what the law requires, which some scholars say may prove that he was that rarest of things, an honest tax collector. But to the crowd that didn't matter. You can't make your living from a corrupt system and stay uncorrupted yourself.

He wasn't going to buy his way into their good graces. He wasn't going to purchase their goodwill by giving to the poor and repaying those he cheated. They were angry... They were angry... They were angry and they wanted their pound of flesh.

How easy and comfortable it can be to live in a constant state of anger and resentment.

How marvelously our ire warms the spine and engorges the muscles. How amazingly indignation sharpens the senses. How gloriously wrath focuses the intellect and the whets the wit. How grand to be wronged to be badly used, to be the victim.

We do love our anger, do we not? But Jesus, in his love for us, calls us out of that anger. He calls us to find, somehow, a way to forgiveness, a way to reconciliation.

He calls us to the other side of anger.

GRACE COMES FIRST

Verse nine is Luke's signature. Today! This day! Salvation has come to this house.

Your salvation is not your own. It has implications beyond that reach into your home, your community, your country. When salvation comes to you it comes a little closer to everyone you know.

Why? Because he gave away his fortune and paid back people he cheated? No! That stuff comes later. Grace, forgiveness, acceptance come first.

Jesus says, "I must stay at your house today." And THEN comes repentance.

Zacchaeus does not earn the love of Jesus. That love is a gift. A gift for all of God's children. Especially the lost. The ones that everyone is angry at and the ones who are angry. The ones who are up in the tree looking down and the ones who are down on the ground looking up.

The ones in the offices and the ones on the streets. The ones on the top of the hill and the ones down at the bottom. The ones in silks and the ones in rags. The ones in the churches and the ones in the jails.

The ones who are not present to hear these words. And the ones who are.

AMEN