

**21 Pentecost
November 3, 2019**

**In the name of the God of all creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

Last week our gospel lesson was about a parable that Jesus told of a Pharisee and a tax collector praying in the Temple. This week we hear about another tax collector ... or is it the same one? This week's tax collector is named Zacchaeus and he is a "chief tax collector" in Jericho. Last week's tax collector was praying in the Temple in Jerusalem. Jerusalem and Jericho are about 16 miles apart ... could they be they be the same person?

In a portion of the gospel that wasn't read, Jesus cures a blind man at the gates of Jericho ... then he enters the city. No doubt Jesus had caused a buzz with this healing, and hearing that Jesus is on his way, Zacchaeus ... the chief tax collector in Jericho ... climbed a tree to see him. When Jesus saw Zacchaeus up in the tree he curiously invited himself to dinner at Zacchaeus's home. And, as to be expected, Jesus, as usual, was criticized for socializing with "sinners."

However, once in his own home, Zacchaeus offered that he would give half of all that he made to the poor, and if he had defrauded anyone, he would pay them back four times over. Jesus says, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Although many of the stories of Jesus appear in more than one gospel, this story only appears in the Gospel of Luke. Luke was written sometime during the last decade of the first century or later. I think it is obvious that the author of Luke was not a first-hand witness to the life of Jesus. And many scholars believe that this story, along with some others, is a product of lore and imagination, and I tend to agree. Yet it tells a truth consistent with the Jesus we have come to know in this gospel ... "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." Did this story actually happen? I don't think so. Is it true? Definitely!

Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector. As I have noted before, this meant that he was a Jew who worked for the occupying Roman authorities. In this patronage system in place at the time, Zacchaeus had other Jews working for him who actually collected the taxes from their fellow Jewish citizens. Those tax collectors would take a portion of what they collected as their pay, and give the rest to Zacchaeus as the chief tax collector. Zacchaeus would then take a portion for himself as his pay, and then give the rest to the Roman governor. It was a lucrative position for Zacchaeus.

Being the chief tax collector meant that Zaccheaus was a Jewish collaborator with the Roman government. It also meant that he was profiting off the backs of his fellow Jews, and his wealth, at their expense, would have been resented. And finally, it meant that he was handling Roman currency with the Emperor's image on it. Since the Roman Emperor was also considered a deity ... a god ... the currency was a violation of the Third Commandment ... "You shall not make any graven image of your God." All this is to say that he would not have been very well received by his fellow Jews in his faith community ... in fact, he was probably despised. He, and they, understood that someone had to do it, but that was still no excuse.

The story also says that Zaccheaus was "short in stature." I cannot speak for my friends who are "short in stature" but I imagine that they know something about Zaccheaus that others don't. For one, Zaccheaus was "over looked" ... literally, people looked over him. In a crowd he would have all but disappeared ... he would have been metaphorically invisible ... one would not be able to see him because he was surrounded by taller people. Also, he would have been "looked down upon" ... not just because of his physical size, but because of his profession as well.

So right from the beginning of the story we know that Zaccheaus had two strikes against him ... he was not included in his community, and he was all but invisible ... existentially dead to those around him.

Yet Zaccheaus was also resourceful ... we know that because he had risen to the level of **chief** tax collector. So when he wasn't able to actually see Jesus ... obviously there was a crowd around Jesus ... Zaccheaus climbed a tree. The text tells us that it was a sycamore tree. However, it was not like our American sycamore trees that grow straight and tall. This sycamore, or sycamore-fig as it is also known, was shorter, with substantial branches closer to the ground ... a tree that looked like a smaller version of our native live oaks.

So Zaccheaus climbed the sycamore-fig tree to get a better vantage point to see Jesus, and as Jesus walked underneath he spotted Zaccheaus and called him by name. We have no idea how Jesus knew his name ... that is left to our imagination. (Maybe Zaccheaus is the tax collector of Jesus' parable ... and it wasn't a parable after all.) Anyhow, Jesus called Zaccheaus by name and told him to come down ... Jesus said, "I must stay at your house today."

The one who is despised by his fellow countrymen ... the one who is excommunicated ... the one without a community ... and the one who is all but invisible to everyone, had been called by name by Jesus and told that Jesus would like to visit him in his own house. Zaccheaus "hurried down and was happy to welcome him." And then the grumbling began. All the others ... good, God fearing Jews ... began criticizing Jesus for sully himself with the likes of Zaccheaus.

However, in his home Zaccheaus was having another experience ... and that experience led him to an obvious life-changing decision. He didn't say he was going to give up his lucrative profession, but he would begin giving half of what he made to the poor. And, in a patronage

system prone to bribery and extortion, he promised to pay quadruple damages to those he had abused.

To this Jesus says, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Now, there are at least two ways to look at this. The first and most popular in Christian circles is to say that Jesus ... as the son of God, the Messiah, the Christ ... pronounced salvation where there was no hope. In other words, he blessed Zacchaeus with "salvation." And, in this reading, the "Son of Man" is seen as a self-reference to Jesus, another name for the one sent by God to find the lost and to save them. This is the understanding that leads to a worship of Jesus as the one responsible for our salvation. In other words, we are sinners, and our only redemption is through Jesus as the Christ. This is a popular and certainly an orthodox Christian viewpoint.

Yet, there is another way to read this story, even if it is a little outside the box. It could be seen as an account about a person lost to his community and to himself. He sees in Jesus a person who is living life in the fullest image of God ... the way God intended for us all to live our lives. His parents had named him "Zacchaeus" ... a name in Hebrew that means "righteous and pure," and Zacchaeus had lived his entire life trying to live up to his name. Being "short of stature" didn't help. But the only one Zacchaeus had ever heard of who truly lived fully in the image of God ... in whose image we are all made ... was Jesus. Zacchaeus was more than curious ... he was driven ... he was compelled ... and he climbed the tree to see this Jesus. Then Jesus called Zacchaeus by name. Zacchaeus was no longer invisible ... no longer existentially dead. He was somebody ... and Jesus ... of all people ... wanted to come eat with him. In a community in which he was not accepted ... in a world where he was all but invisible ... Zacchaeus was now recognized and accepted by the one person who really knew what it meant to live the way God intended us all to live.

It is in that environment that Zacchaeus made his life-changing decision. It was more than just changing his financial practices ... it was changing his way of living. If Zacchaeus was recognized and accepted as a beloved child of God, then he had to recognize and accept that everyone else was a beloved child of God. The respect of his community that he had sought had been fulfilled in the respect that Jesus gave to him. The recognition that he has sought ... in spite of his shortcomings (pun intended) ... he received from Jesus. If that is the way that God wants us to act, and it brings life-giving spirit to his soul, then Zacchaeus was compelled to do no less in his life.

When Jesus saw this he offered a reflection: "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham." In my reading of the story, this was a reflection, this wasn't a pronouncement. It wasn't something bestowed on Zacchaeus, rather, it was an observation of what Jesus saw. The Greek word that is here translated as "salvation" can also be translated as "wholeness." Jesus was seeing Zacchaeus become whole. And then Jesus said, "For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." In my reading, the "Son of Man" was not Jesus referring to himself, rather it was a reference to that capacity ... that quality ... that is given to

each of us by God ... to live into that image of God in which we are made. It is the constant call to live life the way that Jesus lived his life ... not trying to imitate his specific actions, but rather to accept oneself as a beloved child of God, to recognize all others as fellow children of God, and live with a compelling commitment to live as God wants each of us to live.

Those around Jesus saw him live as God intended all of us to live ... and in that they saw what God was like. Jesus did not ask people to worship him, rather he invited others to live the same life he did ... accepting and respecting all others as fellow beloved children of God. That is what it means to take seriously what Jesus took seriously. It was true then and it is true today.

Whatever is in the past is in the past. Zacchaeus accepted the invitation and salvation ... and wholeness did indeed come to his house. He discovered the "Son of Man" within himself as he began to live into the image of God in which he was made ... and it changed his life.

Was there an actual Zacchaeus who was a short chief tax collector and lived in Jericho. Was Zacchaeus the same tax collector as the one in the parable Jesus told about the two men praying in the Temple? I don't know ... it is not really the point. This isn't about whether the story actually happened, or happened the way that Luke reports it. Rather it is about how we know the story to be true for us. As tall as I am I often come up short. I haven't always been "righteous and pure" as Zacchaeus's name called him to be. I have been lost at times in my life. But that was then, and now is now, and I still have the chance to live in the image of God in which I was made. Today is another day.

Did the story actually happen? I doubt it. Is the story true? Definitely! It was true for those of the early Christian community, and it is true for us today. Sometimes we lose our way. But we are all beloved children of God. We are all known by name. We are all worthy, regardless of our position or stature. We are all called to live into the image of God in which we were made. When we do, we are taking seriously what Jesus took seriously. When we do, we experience salvation ... we experience wholeness. We experience the same wholeness that Zacchaeus experienced when he was accepted as a beloved child of God.

Amen.