

*Based on Luke 19:1-10. Zacchaeus Finds a Friend in Jesus*

Imagine someone you despise. For, you think, very good reason. Maybe that person has, you believe, caused great harm to your community. Perhaps even this community. I will not ask you to name this person – or group of people. Simply bring them into your mind's eye.

Now imagine that person has walked through the doors of this congregation, straight up the aisle – at the invitation of Jesus no less! – and stands here at the center of the table ready to recite the Eucharistic Prayer and invite you to communion.

How do you feel? In your body? In your spirit? *Conflicted. Angry. Afraid. Deceived. Confused. Shocked.*

Hold on to this feeling for a little while longer. Long enough to feel compassion for the crowd in our Lesson today, in their visceral reaction to the naming and affirming of Zacchaeus, whose name means *Innocent*. To the crowd, Zacchaeus is NOT innocent! He is the CHIEF of all the tax collectors in a major metropolis just outside Jerusalem. Where Herod himself, has a sprawling palace. You might imagine this as the IRS headquarters of first century Judea.

But this is no IRS like anything you and I know, where generally speaking, as much as we grumble and mumble, there are standard rules and regulations and some semblance of reasonable expectation of functioning government services in exchange for what is paid.

First century Judea is much more like a feudal system gone amok, with greater wealth and greater wealth and greater wealth accumulating in the hands of a very narrow elite, and the tax collectors acting as corrupt agents to squeeze the lifeblood of the masses. Zacchaeus, we assume, as the chief tax collector of first century IRS headquarters, is the most corrupt among the corrupt.

And yet Zacchaeus has heard about this Jesus guy, and the reign of God Jesus says is right here at hand if we only open our eyes, and the reputation Jesus has for hanging out with sinners and tax collectors, and so when Jesus passes through Jericho on his way to Jerusalem, Zacchaeus – who by all rights should be hiding in shame – instead shows up as the lead protagonist by hosting Jesus for Shabbas dinner.

What a crock! The crowd rightly grumbles. For us, it would be like the CEO of Rockwool showing up for a rally with the Poor People's Campaign and instead of giving him a piece of his mind about the harm he is doing to the planet – and to our county – Jesus starts celebrating communion in his mansion.

The CEO of Rockwool is causing *so much harm*, we would say. The Chief Tax Collector of Jericho is causing *so much harm* the crowd in our Lesson would say. And we would be right!

But we might not have the entire picture.

We do not know the story of Zacchaeus beyond the few lines in the Lesson from Luke that form our lectionary today. Was he pressured into the job by his parents, when he really wanted to run off and be a musician? Did he grow up among power and privilege with no real clue how the rest of the world actually lives? Did he grow up traumatized by poverty and vow to himself he would do whatever it took to escape that cycle? Was he just

really good at facts and figures and doing the best he could to find a decent job in a tough economy? Did he have a wife who was sick or a kid with a learning disability who needed the money to get good care?

We really do not know.

What we do know is Jesus sees him. Acknowledges him. Calls him by name. And prevails upon him for a welcome into his assumedly opulent home. And therein lies the hope of humanity, at least in the classic interpretation of the transformation of Zacchaeus from agent of empire to the Robin Hood of Jericho, going above and beyond the simple “tithing” to a radical redistribution of wealth that ensures everyone in the community is able to thrive. What a powerful example of repentance, healing, and grace, we would say!

And it is true. We could stop right here, and the story would be powerful.

But there is another, more recent reading that scholars are beginning to offer when it comes to Zacchaeus. A reading that rises from the symbolic name – *Innocent* – and the challenge of translating verb tense from the Greek to the English. *I will give* to the poor, says Zacchaeus in our English version. *I will pay back* what I owe, he says. Which could also be rendered: *I am already giving* to the poor, and *I am already paying back* what I owe. Meaning the repentance of Zacchaeus may have occurred well before he encountered Jesus. Or. In an even more profound reading of this text, it is possible Zacchaeus has been redistributing his wealth all along, knowing full well he was profiting unfairly in an incredible unjust economy.

It is possible to read this Lesson in the Greek with an understanding that Zacchaeus really is, as his name suggests, *Innocent*. That he has been, as one of my mentors likes to say, *subverting the system for Jesus* from the very beginning. And the crowd has misjudged him. It is possible to read this Lesson in the Greek with an understanding that it is, in fact, *the crowd* that has been *saved*, challenged to transform their own prejudices in order to allow for structural healing and reform. It is possible to read this Lesson in the Greek with an understanding that it is the *reputation* of Zacchaeus that has been saved. And that the healing grace of God, the reign of God Jesus came to proclaim, really was here all along, if we just opened our eyes and paid attention.

None of this means, of course, that we stop working for justice or calling out harm that is done by those with power and privilege, and its devastating impact for those whom Jesus calls *the least of these, my siblings*. It *does* mean we remember, always, that our struggle for justice is with *powers and principalities*, not with people. We do not want to be part of all that judging. We want to be part of the healing of the world.

So let’s return to that initial act of imagination and the visceral experience of anger and fear in our bodies and spirits as we envision the one we despise, for good reason, walking through the doors of this congregation and up to a place of honor. Our work, in The Way of Jesus, is to breathe loving-kindness and light into those places within ourselves that hurt and fear and seethe with anger. And then to imagine Jesus turning toward us in the crowd, and acknowledging us, and calling us, too, by name.

Let the church say, Amen!