

“From the Treetops to the Table”

Sermon from Luke 19:1-10

Given Sunday, August 8, 2021

for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville

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Entering Jericho, Jesus passed through the city. There was a wealthy person there named Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector. Zacchaeus was trying to see who Jesus was, but he couldn't do so because of the crowd, since he was short.

In order to see Jesus, Zacchaeus ran on ahead, then climbed a sycamore tree that was along the route. When Jesus came to the spot, he looked up and said, “Zacchaeus, hurry up and come on down. I’m going to stay at your house today.” Zacchaeus quickly climbed down and welcomed Jesus with delight.

When everyone saw this, they began to grumble, “Jesus has gone to a sinner’s house as a guest.”

Zacchaeus stood his ground and said to Jesus, “Here and now I give half my belongings to poor people. If I’ve defrauded anyone in the least, I’ll pay them back fourfold.”

Jesus said to the tax collector, “Today salvation has come to this house, for this is what it means to be a descendant of Sarah and Abraham. The Promised One has come to search out and save what was lost.”

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So... what was lost?

Zacchaeus was lost. We know it from the very beginning of this story. It's like the storytellers try to play a trick on us - his name means pure, means innocent, but come on.

There are lots of ways we know he's lost: He's a tax collector. Which means he's a collaborator with Rome, with the occupying force oppressing his people. And he's rich. He's not just a tax collector but the *chief* tax collector. Commentator Will Willimon tells us, "In a corrupt system, the loftier one's position, the greater one's complicity in that system. While nothing of the private life of Zacchaeus is revealed in the story, this much we know on principle: no one can be privately righteous while participating in, and profiting from, a program that robs and crushes other persons."

Clear enough. Zacchaeus is lost.

Everyone around him seems to know it, too. Whether they know it because he's a tax collector, or because they know those other details of his life that the storyteller doesn't pass on to the rest of us, everyone on this block joins the uproar when Jesus announces he's gonna hang out with that guy.

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Who do you know that's lost?

You might know one of our neighbors outside, I'll call him... Kevin. You might recognize him if you saw him. He sometimes is around the church, visits the STAR breakfast, sits and chats with

friends in the courtyard. He sometimes is kind to those who cross his path, and he sometimes is gruff with them. There's a woman he's often near - the two of them used to be in a romantic relationship, but that's ended - and now sometimes they yell at each other.

Some of us have the luxury of arguing with our partners, getting exasperated with our children, freaking out and falling apart, all in the privacy of our own homes. If I get really mad and punch a pillow in my bedroom, that's ok. It's healthy, even encouraged. Our neighbors who live on the streets live all of those moments, the whole beautiful and terrible spectrum, unwittingly on stage.

Kevin and his ex have a troubled relationship. You know how I know that? I hear it. You know why I hear it? Because there's no door they can close to have an argument behind, no shower they can run to drown out their voices. He's got no pillow to punch.

I mean, I might be lost - any one of us might be lost - but we won't know that about each other the way we know it about Kevin. He's always trying to bite it back, but you can hear the anger and disappointment in his voice, most every time he speaks. You can see the sadness in the lines of his face, and you can see his face, because he's got no place to hide away.

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You know who else was lost?

This neighbor I had, back in Kansas. I'll call him Clint. Some of you have heard me talk about Clint before. I don't know if everybody knew he was lost, but his wife knew. And she came over one day, and then I knew. We'd been friendly in our driveways, but hadn't ever visited the insides of each other's houses - but one day she came over, for the first and last time. I poured her some tea. She said down nervously, spoke haltingly. She'd come to tell me she was leaving - getting out of there, going to Indiana, where she had relatives she could stay with. He was unpredictable, she said. Maybe not dangerous but she didn't trust him, couldn't be around him anymore. She was scared. When they met he'd confessed to her his addictions, but he'd been in recovery for years by that point. Lately, she'd noticed changes in his behavior, his temperament. She was sure he was using again. She said she had to get away. He was lost, and she wanted to go someplace he couldn't find her.

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The Promised One has come to search out and and save what was lost. To search out and save. But... what was lost? And what is that work, "searching out and saving"?

He's the thing about this story Luke tells about Zacchaeus. There are options for how we read it. Options within the text itself.

One option is to side with the crowd, to be indignant at Jesus' choice of company. To take at face value their assessment of him as lost.

This makes a compelling story. It sets us up for this moment where Zacchaues repents, and is redeemed. Here's how that story goes: lost in his own greed, Zacchaeus is found by Jesus. He repents of all he's done wrong. Having met Jesus, having been affirmed by him, embraced by him in front of all his detractors - Zacchaeus then becomes someone new: a generous, lavishly kind person: challenging the corruptness of the system by paying people back what's rightfully theirs, plus more to anyone he's inadvertently cheated out of their due. He'll make himself poor, he seems to say, making things right. And he becomes a hero. That's called salvation. The crowd was right in their judgment, of course - Zacchaeus was lost - but now he's changed, so we can hope their judgment of him changes, too, and they recognize him for the child of Abraham and Sarah that he is - just like each of them - faithful.

That's one option.

The other option is to doubt the crowd. To put their judgment to scrutiny. To imagine that maybe the story is more complicated than that.

Here's a trick to remember when we're interpreting scripture, or, maybe, when we're reading people: it's always more complicated than that.

This other option for reading, it hinges on verb tense. And which translation of scripture you read determines which verb tense Zacchaeus' statement is rendered in. If we don't already have our

minds made up about what this story is about, we might notice the defiance in Zacchaeus' stance here.

When the people grumble, when they mutter about Jesus spending his afternoon at this guy's house, given who this guy is... the text tells us, "Zacchaeus stood his ground, and said to Jesus: 'Here and now I give half my belongings to the poor.'" Present tense. Over and over again in the translations, we find this in the present tense. This is what I do. It's not a promise. It's a declaration. Zacchaeus' gossiping neighbors don't motivate him to turn his life around. They give him an opening, to declare to someone who might finally listen, "this is not who I am." His neighbors have known him as a crook, as a collaborator, and on the surface, that's got to be at least partly true. But when he gets a chance to tell his own story - to Jesus, who he trusts might see deeper - we all get to overhear the generosity he's trying to enact every day, the ways he is both located in a corrupt system and doing what he can to subvert it. They haven't known it, but that doesn't make it any less true.

We do see Zacchaeus move in this story - both literally and figuratively. He's a seeker, so he climbs a tree. Jesus invites him to a new understanding, so he has to leave his position on high and experience the world at the same level as everyone else - maybe, at some times, that means not having the best view. But the story begins with him wanting to see Jesus, and not just see but know him - the scriptures have this strange emphasis - Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus, *to see who he was* - and it ends, hopefully, with his neighbors knowing him in a new way, too.

Which makes this not a redemption story, but a revelation story.

We love a good redemption story - a story that tells us that someone else, some scoundrel, has changed into someone, you know, better. Revelation stories are harder, because *they ask us to emerge* into a new understanding.

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I don't know if you were anywhere near downtown on Wednesday afternoon, if you happened to notice complications in the travel patterns down 99 around 5th Street. When you got close enough to see, maybe you noticed there'd been a two-car collision - a few people standing around outside the vehicles, but looking in - like someone was still inside. They didn't look too worried, no major injuries, at least it seemed to passersby, but it was going to be a little while before everyone and everything was cleared and ok.

And, as sometimes happens in moments like this, before anyone official arrives on the scene, some helpful soul notices that people need some guidance, some encouragement to move along, someone to coordinate things for folks not immediately involved. Someone to direct traffic. It's a tricky position, to put your body in the line of oncoming cars, when you're not in uniform, when you've got no special tools or equipment, no silver whistle or orange baton, when you're just hoping, trusting, that those coming will see you, will take your direction. And on Wednesday, Kevin took on that role.

Kevin, who is not always an upstanding citizen. Kevin, who the officers arriving on the scene might well have encountered earlier that day in a not-as-generous mood. Kevin, who sometimes uses his booming voice in ways that are more hurtful than helpful. He stayed on the scene until officers arrived - at first, just one car showed up, with one officer, and that one went to check on the person still in the involved vehicle. So Kevin stayed - he did not abandon his post - until more officers were able to make it and they could take over the work he'd been doing in those minutes immediately following the accident.

It may be that those moments called to something deep in Kevin, asked him to emerge into a new kind of neighbor. It may also be that, for all of his life that is so much on stage, the rest of us just hadn't had a chance to see him play a scene like that one yet.

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About a week after my neighbor told me she was moving out, suspicious traffic started coming and going from her old house - the house where her husband remained. I hadn't seen much of him. We'd waved at the mailbox a few times. I'd thought I should bring him some soup, maybe, acknowledge the new situation, but the thought of it made me a little nervous. And then one day, cars just started coming and going. Not staying too long. I'd see the guests not even knock on his door, but go around to the backyard, often carrying bags. They weren't cars I'd seen there before, weren't people I recognized. And I couldn't imagine what so many of them wanted at my neighbor's house.... I mean, I say I couldn't imagine, but of course, I did imagine. I imagined whole stories

based on what the woman who left had told me. If he was using again, were these friends from that scene. If there's a bunch of new traffic on my street, just a bunch of quick stops - was he dealing, also? Is that how he planned to support himself with his wife gone? I worried for my neighborhood, for my kids, for my grandma that we lived with.

Then one day, I was out in my yard when a woman drove up, parked in my neighbor's driveway. She threw open her car door and I could hear a child crying in her backseat, hear her making assurances that she wouldn't be long. She looked frazzled, harried, started to head for the backyard, like she knew where she was going. I couldn't believe she was going to leave that kid in the car while she ran in to get - well, whatever she was getting - but I also was pretty sure I didn't want the kid to go with her, either. I was working up a speech in my head I knew I wouldn't have the courage to give, when she saw me and laughed.

She said, "Oh, hey. What do you think of what your neighborhood is becoming this week?" I opened my mouth but couldn't reply. She said, "I mean, it's really generous of him. I always wanted this but just didn't know where to go before, or had to go really far..." And I thought, is this for real? This casual conversation about the drugs she's scoring while her kid screams in the back seat? And I'm supposed to think my neighbor is a good guy because he's moved the supply so close to home for her? "He's not even charging," she told me, "he's just offering..." And I said, "Oh... I didn't know he was offering..." and maybe because I didn't look excited, she said, "Wait, really, you don't know?" And I said, "No, I

guess not, but I'm not really into..." And she said, "They're here! The monarchs are here!" And I must've looked confused then, because she went on to tell me that a massive crowd of these migrating butterflies had decided to rest from their long journey on my neighbor's giant backyard oak tree. They'd been there several days. And he'd been talking about it all around town, and he'd contacted a photography society, and folks were spreading the word about this exquisite beauty that had descended, and they were coming from nearby and from many miles away to see it. It was generous. It was beautiful, and life-giving. And I was so wrong.

This is not a redemption story. This is a revelation story.

I mean, maybe those categories are too strict, too clean. Maybe we are all, always, a little bit lost, maybe we are all, often, about to be found. Maybe our God, maybe our neighbors, are always searching for and saving all of us, from ourselves, from each other, from our ideas about our own righteousness, from our lack of imagination about that of our neighbors. Maybe the whole world, and all that is in it, is a story of redemption and revelation. May it be so.