

The Story of Zaccheus — Rev. Denise Stone

Text: Luke 19:1-10

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH BIG FLATS NY, 11-3-19

For some of us, everything we know about today's story is from the children's song ... so sing along if you know it.... Motions are allowed as well!

*Zacchaeus 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 said, 'Zacchaeus, you come down!
For I'm going to your house today!
For I'm going to your house today!'*ⁱ

Thank you for joining me in that “LITTLE” trip down memory lane.

This seems like a fairly straightforward story. We talked last week about how Tax Collectors were viewed unfavorably. They were seen at best as unethical and at worst as traitors to their people – since they were working with the Roman Government.

In the Gospel of Luke we are also primed to look down on people who are wealthy – think of the parables of the Rich Young Ruler, the wealthy man who was going to tear down his barns to build new ones to hold his bumper crop, and the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus.

Zaccheus, as “Chief Tax Collector” definitely fit into the wealthy category. The first hearers of Luke’s Gospel were set up to have certain expectations of this story.

This story takes place after the story of a blind man outside of the city of Jericho. In that story the crowd following Jesus was preventing the blind man from getting to Jesus, but Jesus saw him anyway and called the blind man to him and healed him.

In today’s story the crowd is also getting in the way of Zaccheus seeing Jesus. We are told that Zaccheus is a man of small stature. I have always assumed that meant he was “a wee little” man as the song tells us. Given Zaccheus’ occupation, he could also have been viewed by his contemporaries as a man of diminished value – small in stature of a different kind.

So whether the crowd was preventing Zaccheus from seeing because of his height, or they wouldn’t let him join them to see Jesus, the fact remains that he

wanted to see Jesus and he was unable. The crowd preventing access to Jesus links the two stories. Hold on to that thought for a bit.

Zaccheus, unable to see Jesus, runs ahead and climbs up in a Sycamore tree. It was so important to Zaccheus to see Jesus, that he “lowers” himself to climb a tree like a child would do. It is possible that Zaccheus thought he could go unobserved from that vantage point. Who in the crowd is going to notice him when everyone is looking at Jesus?

Jesus is who. As Jesus passes by Zaccheus’ location, Jesus looks up and calls out to Zaccheus. “Zaccheus hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.” Zaccheus went from being unseen to being the focus of attention. Verse 6 tells us that Zaccheus “hurried down and was happy to welcome him.”ⁱⁱ

What happens next? The crowd begins to grumble. “Doesn’t Jesus know who Zaccheus is?” “How can Jesus even consider going to his house?” In Jesus day sitting down for a meal with someone meant that you approved of them or demonstrated “social solidarity”ⁱⁱⁱ with the person. Jesus’ association with “tax collectors and sinners” was also seen by many others as an indictment on Jesus’ character.

Jesus was not concerned about societal expectations. Not with the Blind Man of the previous story and certainly not with Zaccheus.

And that brings us up to verse 8 and to a question of translation.

Verse 8 in the New Revised Standard Version, which we read from earlier, reads as follows:

⁸ Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much."

Now if you read this verse in the Revised Standard Version, it reads like this:

⁸ And Zacchae'us stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold."^{iv}

Did you catch the difference? It can be easy to miss. The verbs used in the Greek language are in the present tense. This is translated in the present tense in the RSV as "*I give, I restore.*" This is translated with a future tense application in the New RSV as "*I will give, I will pay back.*"

Pastor David Lose puts the question this way,

Is Zacchaeus' declaration of his financial dealings in verse 8 a promise of future action in response to Jesus' visit, or is it a report on his present behavior? If the former, then this is a classic repentance story; if the latter, it is something else entirely.^v

Depending on which translation you follow, can imply a different meaning. I have always understood that Zaccheus, in verse 8 responds to his encounter with Jesus with a promised change in behavior. And that Jesus follows up this promised change by declaring that Zaccheus is a child of Abraham – Zaccheus is restored to the family of God. By using this future tense translation, it makes this a story of repentance and salvation.

How does our understanding of this story change if we use the present tense translation? First, it means that Zaccheus is not a typical tax collector. It means that Zaccheus was not unethical, but rather tried to do his work as responsibly and as honestly as possible. It also means that Zaccheus made giving to the poor a priority. It is also very possible that Zaccheus' actions were not known by the crowd, given the reputation that Tax collectors had, in general.

Otherwise, they would not have had a strong reason to grumble about Jesus going to his house.

What else changes if we use a present tense translation?

Pastor Lose again suggests that Jesus does not

... commend Zacchaeus' penitence, or his faith, or his change of heart. He merely pronounces blessing, blessing based not on anything Zacchaeus has done but simply because he, like those grumbling around him, is an Israelite, a son of Abraham. Further, Zacchaeus does not offer his financial disclosure in response to anything Jesus has said; rather, it falls on the heels of the grumbling of the crowd. Perhaps it is a response to Jesus' presence, but perhaps it is his bewilderment at the crowd's complaint or a defense of his reputation. In either case, I suspect that Zacchaeus is not turning over a new leaf as much as he is lifting up an old one for all to see.^{vi}

I want to remind you of the story of the blind man that comes just before this story of Zaccheus. Both the blind man by virtue of being blind and Zaccheus by virtue of being a tax collector “of small stature” are

outcasts of normal society. Just as these two stories are linked by the obstruction of the crowds, these two stories are also linked by the men being outcasts.

Verse 10 tells us “¹⁰ For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost.” Throughout Luke’s Gospel, Jesus sides with the outcasts. Jesus restores people to their rightful place as children of God. Jesus treats the outcasts, those on the margins of society, with respect and with compassion.

When we study Scripture, it is useful to look at multiple translations to get fuller pictures of how the Greek (or Hebrew) might be translated into English or your native language and how that can enrich our possible understandings of the message we are hearing and learning.

Whether the story of Zaccheus is a story of repentance or more of a story of restoration, as followers of Christ, we should also respond to the outcasts, those on the margins of society, with respect and with compassion.

Our job is not to serve in the role of the crowd, preventing people that society deems unworthy from reaching Jesus. Our job is to be more like the Sycamore tree and lift up people so that they can see Jesus more clearly. We need to facilitate their

encounter with Jesus. Jesus is the only one who can declare salvation in their lives and declare that they are Children of God.

This is especially important for us to remember today as we gather for Communion. Jesus determines who is welcome at His table. Jesus is in charge of the guest list.

Join me in prayer as we prepare for Communion.

We do not presume to come to this your table, merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your abundant and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table. But you are the same Lord, who always delights in showing mercy. Grant us, therefore, gracious Lord, so to partake of this sacrament of your son Jesus Christ, that we may walk in newness of life, may grow into his likeness, and may evermore dwell in him, and he in us. Amen.^{vii}

ⁱ <https://genius.com/Traditional-zacchaeus-was-a-wee-little-man-lyrics>

ⁱⁱ New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4253

^{iv} Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1946, 1952, and 1971 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

^v https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=825

^{vi} https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=825

^{vii} <https://milewis.wordpress.com/2015/05/28/prayer-of-humble-access/>