10-15/16-16 Rev. Amy Haines

Luke 19:1-10 The Saving of Zacchaeus

Many of you know the song, so sing it with me now:

*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 as the Savior passed him by, He looked up in the tree, And he said, "Zacchaeus, you come down; for I'm going to your house today, for I'm going to your house today."*

His story, unique to the Gospel of Luke, is familiar to many of us through that classic children’s song we just sang. Yet is Zacchaeus so familiar that we miss the power of his story? His story is a story we read time and again in the Gospel of Luke, summarized in verse 10 of today’s Scripture passage: “The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

According to 1st century Jewish society, Zacchaeus was clearly one of the lost. He may have been small in stature, yet he was large in wealth and large in power. Zacchaeus was the chief tax collector in the bustling city of Jericho, the final stop for many travelers before they headed away from the Jordan River to walk the final 15 miles to Jerusalem. He was a Jew who worked for the despised Roman government.

Think of your opinions of our modern day tax collectors, employees of the Internal Revenue Service.

“While most employees of the IRS are good, honest, upstanding people, it fits our bias to think of them as nasty, cheating low-lifes. Chances are, none of us thought as children, "When I grow up, I want to be a tax collector!"

And few of us look at our sons and daughters, and say with misty eyes, "Dear, you'd make me very happy if you went to work for the IRS!" Tax collection is not a popular career path, and those who choose it are in for a world of trouble.” --Homiletics 11-1-98

Today we complain about the many taxes we must pay to the government, but at least we have a system in place that keeps the percentage of taxes fairly consistent. We know that the percentage of taxes we pay each year will be according to our income, and rarely do those percentages change drastically.

This was not the case in first-century Palestine. Israel was under Roman occupation, and Rome collected taxes by using local Jewish men as tax collectors. Most tax collectors were not above cheating, stealing, lying, threatening, and bribing in order to make more money for themselves. Zacchaeus and his cohorts could stop a person in Jericho and assess duties on nearly everything in his or her possession. A cart, for instance, could be taxed for each wheel, for the animal that pulled it, and for the merchandise that it carried.”

--Bill Wilson 10-31-04 day1.net

Because they got rich at the expense of their own people, most tax collectors were seen as equal to or worse than thieves. In fact, Jewish rabbis categorized tax collectors in the same category as thieves, thereby branding them as ceremonially unclean and forbidden from the Temple. They, along with their families, were also disqualified from giving testimony in a Jewish court. Tax collectors were treated as part of the scum of Jewish society, the lowliest of sinners and outcasts.

Yet even these sinners yearned to be in Jesus’ presence. Even the outcasts of Jewish society were curious about the young rabbi named Jesus.

Jesus and his disciples were on their way to Jerusalem, along with thousands of other Jews, for the Passover feast. And only Jesus seemed to grasp the reality that this would be his last trip to Jerusalem, for he was also on his way to the cross. So every healing, every word, every action was a teaching moment for the disciples of Jesus, a call to the crowd that followed Jesus, reminding them all of the truth about the kingdom of God in this world.

Just before Jesus entered Jericho, he had healed a blind beggar. News of that healing preceded Jesus into the city, and Zacchaeus, like many, was excited and curious to catch even a glimpse of Jesus.

Being short in stature, Zacchaeus began to press toward the front of the crowd for a better glimpse of Jesus.

Typical hospitality of the time ought to have allowed him a place on the front edge of the crowd, but since he was a despised tax collector, he was not shown any hospitality and kept getting pushed away, farther and farther to the back of the crowd.

Have you ever been to a parade where you couldn’t see past the person in front of you? You can hear the band playing, the fire trucks blaring, the horses prancing, but because you are short, cannot see who and what are making such great sounds.

I also remember going to the movie theater before they created stadium seating and I always seemed to end up sitting in the middle section, where the floor dipped down, sitting behind the tallest head in the theater. I have lost count of how many movies and musicals and plays I have seen only in part, unable to see clearly the entire stage or screen because of the person in front of me.

Zacchaeus could not see Jesus because he was not allowed in the front of the crowd. Determined, undaunted, Zacchaeus ran ahead of the procession and climbed a sycamore tree in order to see Jesus pass by.

Now, most self-respecting men would never consider climbing up a tree. It was an affront to their dignity. It was an offense to their standing in the community. Yet what did Zacchaeus have to lose? He was already despised by many. In the tree he could even be half-hidden and observe without being observed.

So Zacchaeus, yearning to see Jesus, climbed a tree. And in that tree is where Jesus found him. When Jesus walked by, he looked up, saw Zacchaeus and told him, “Hurry up and come down; for I must stay at your house today.”

Throughout the Gospel of Luke, Jesus sees people the world overlooks. He sees their needs. He sees their yearnings. He sees them as human beings when others only view them as outcasts.

On Thursday I attended the funeral of the husband of one of my clergy friends. In the eulogy, Ruth told a story about Willie’s personality that, like Jesus, also saw men and women and their needs whom the world often overlooked. She said that one day they were in Wal-Mart, and Ruth was focused on getting the groceries on her list and getting home. Willie, however, began to wonder the store in typical Willie fashion. Near the dressing room he came across a mother holding a newborn child, and could tell she was distressed. So Willie began to talk with her and like he often did found out her story. They had just come from the hospital after the baby’s birth to buy diapers and such, and the father had abandoned them there in Wal-Mart, wanting nothing to do with this newborn. So here she was stuck in the store, yet needing to buy essentials for her child with no means to do so. Willie went and found Ruth, and they took care of the needed essentials. Ruth admitted that if it wasn’t for Willie, she would have never truly seen this mother and her baby. How many times do we get so focused on what we have to do in life that we miss seeing those around us? I know I can be guilty of that.

Jesus saw people as they are, and as they yearned to be. Jesus saw Zacchaeus up in the tree, and demanded that he come down. Excitedly, Zacchaeus scurried down from the tree, honored to welcome Jesus into his own home.

You can imagine what happened next. The crowd, the townspeople of Jericho, and even the disciples—the rich and the poor, the insiders and the outcasts of society—they began to grumble, with righteous indignation, grumbling that Jesus, a revered rabbi, would once again stoop so low as to eat with such a sinner as this despised tax collector. They were appalled that Zacchaeus willingly obliged to host the revered rabbi rather than defer to someone more worthy.

Would we find ourselves with the same attitude if Jesus were to join us for worship today, and instead of choosing to eat with the pastor or the leaders of the church he would choose the least likely with which to dine?

Maybe Jesus would choose to dine with the family who appear to have it all together yet behind closed doors are dealing with debt and depression. Or the teenager who is mad at God for his parent’s divorce. Maybe he would choose the young man who is battling addiction. Or the older couple who are living together because they cannot marry due to pension restrictions.

How often do we judge one another based on appearances rather than getting to know one another at the heart level? How often are we quick to dismiss someone as not worthy or beyond help?

The crowd in Jericho grumbled, appalled that Jesus would choose to see and welcome a corrupt tax collector like Zacchaeus.

Yet that was the pattern of Jesus’ ministry. Jesus regularly broke bread with those the religious leaders considered unclean and outcast. And to break bread with someone meant that you welcomed them, you viewed them as an equal. Jesus regularly said he was called to the least, the last, the lost of society, reminding those who were outcast that God still saw them, God still loved them, and God still yearned for a right relationship with them.

According to the Gospel of Luke, on Jesus’ way to Jerusalem not only did he welcome and bless a tax collector named Zacchaeus he challenged a rich young ruler to give it all away. Jesus encountered many others considered outcasts including a blind beggar and ten lepers in need of healing. He encountered children and told a story about a widow woman.

Jesus lived his mission even on his way to Jerusalem with his face set toward the cross. And what was that mission? To seek out and to save the lost.

The crowd saw Zacchaeus as a cheat and a scoundrel. So they are appalled when Jesus goes to eat again with THOSE people. They are further shocked when Zacchaeus opens his mouth to defend himself.

In the NRSV translation, Zacchaeus appears to be softened by Jesus calling his name and pledges a future commitment: "Look, half of my possessions I will give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much."

The verbs in that translation appear to be future tense. However, recent scholars have pointed out that the Greek in this passage is present tense, not future tense. So the Common English Bible translates this passage accurately by having Zacchaeus shock the presumptions of the crowd by boasting, “Look, Lord, I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone, I repay them four times as much.” (CEB) These are actions he is already doing, ways he is already being generous, unbeknownst to his townspeople who regard him only with disdain.

“Today salvation has come to this house,” Jesus declared of Zacchaeus, “because he too is a son of Abraham.”

This is not just a declaration of salvation in the future; it is also an affirmation of salvation in the present.

This is a blessing of Zacchaeus not because of what he has said or what he is doing or what he plans to do.

This is a blessing of Zacchaeus not because he has first repented of his cheating ways, or not because he is already generous. Rather, this is a blessing of Zacchaeus solely because he is a beloved child of God.

God sees us as we are created to be, beloved men and women, beloved sons and daughters of God. God looks beyond our fears and failures, beyond our struggles and sins. God loves us because God is love, regardless of how society may view us. God seeks to be in relationship with us because that is God’s nature, not because we have worked to earn a place in God’s kingdom.

..Perhaps you have heard the story of the man who came to the gates of heaven to be greeted by St. Peter.

Peter asks the man if he can give a brief history of his life with an emphasis on the good deeds he had done in order to gain entrance into the kingdom of heaven. "You will need 1000 points to be admitted," Peter tells the man.

"This will be a cinch," the man thinks to himself, "I've been involved in church from the days of my youth."

Then he begins to list his activities for Peter. He was an officer in his youth group, served in every possible position he could as a youngster. Was on the Church Council and every committee the church had to offer.

His list was extensive.

"Very impressive," Peter smiles at the man. An angel standing with them also smiled and nodded as he tallied the points and then whispered in Peter's ear. Peter tells the man, "This is quite striking -- we seldom see men of your very good works. You will be pleased to know that you have 327 points! Is there anything else you can think of?"

The poor soul breaks into a cold sweat and begins to reach deep for every single act of kindness he could think of. He listed them as the angel scratched furiously on his angelic clip board and nodded his head in admiration.

Peter looks at the clip board and says, "This is quite exceptional! You now have a total of 402 points. Can you think of anything else?"

The distressed guy strives to recall good deeds – like the time he helped a little old lady across the street.

He finally arrives at a grand total of 431 points and cries out... "I am sunk! There is no hope for me! What more could I have done? O Lord, all I can do is beg for your mercy!"

"THAT," exclaims Peter, "Is a thousand points!" --John Jewell, “Qualities of Faith” sermons.com

Jesus sees us as who we are, beloved children of God. Jesus then invites us back into a relationship with God.

This relationship is not based on good works or changed lives, but based on God’s redemptive grace and love.

When we see ourselves the way God sees us, we are freed from the burden to live up to unrealistic expectations that try to earn our way into heaven, that try to prove our way into God’s love.

.. In the early days of the Salvation Army, a young man named Alexander was made treasurer of the Army.

William Booth, who was the founder of the Salvation Army, and his wife, Catherine, dearly loved Alexander.

They trusted him and treated him like a son.

Little by little, however, Alexander began taking money from the treasury. He took more and more until finally he was caught and arrested and sent to jail. William and Catherine Booth still loved Alexander. They visited him in prison, wrote him letters weekly, and prayed for him daily.

Alexander was so touched by their gracious spirit. He was penitent and remorseful, and he asked for their forgiveness. On the morning Alexander was released from jail, Mrs. Booth was waiting outside the front gate of the prison with a little thermos of tea. She invited Alexander to sit down on a nearby bench, and then she poured him a cup of tea.

"Alexander," she said, "I have something here more than tea." She reached into her purse and pulled out a moneybag. "General Booth and I want you to come back to the Salvation Army and help us," she said to him.

"And we want you to begin your duties as our treasurer this very morning."

-- James Moore day1.org 11-18-01 “Grit, Grace and Gratitude”

Jesus’ mission was to seek out and save the lost. And Jesus did so by seeing people as they are, reminding them of who they were created to be, and inviting them to live by God’s kingdom ways in this world.

Zacchaeus was another one of the lost that Jesus came to save. And just like the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son, Jesus’ encounter with Zacchaeus reminds us that God will never give up on us, for it is God’s very nature to seek out the lost, then celebrate when the lost are found.

This is amazing love, amazing grace, offered to each and every one of us today as much as it was offered to Zacchaeus many years ago. There is nothing we can do to earn such love and grace. There is nothing we have done to make ourselves worthy of such love and grace.

God loves us because we are God’s beloved. God offers us the grace of forgiveness and the promise of new life, in this world and for all eternity, because of God’s generous nature.

How do we respond to such a gift of salvation? How do we respond to such an unexpected story of grace as told through the story of Zacchaeus? Are we willing to accept that God loves everyone? Are we willing to accept that the lost can be found?

What we do in response to such amazing grace is our witness of a changed heart, a changed mind, a changed life that follows in the footsteps of Jesus.

..Charlie did not have a good reputation. “He cheats,” one person whispered. “He’s selfish” said another.

“All he cares about is money,” commented a third. Even though Charlie stayed to himself, that didn’t stop the talk behind his back.

“It’s true,” Charlie admitted, “I like to make and save money. And I expect people to repay me the same way I would repay others.” But Charlie didn’t see the real issue. Money was too important, even when it came to friends. He didn’t value people. And, in a way, he didn’t value himself.

One day, that all changed. A wind from the north began to blow cold. The temperature suddenly dropped. The trees began to bend with the wind. Then they whipped around as if they were made out of rubber. Some of the bending trees broke apart and rammed into houses. The wind picked up so much speed, a local official solemnly announced a public state of emergency on television.

The local school library was turned into a shelter for families who lost their homes to the wind. A call went out for donations. Money, food, good clothing, and bedding. People from the neighborhood banded together and went to the school to see if they could help.

When they arrived, many of the children were amazed to see Charlie there. The children buzzed with comments. Charlie did his best to ignore them, until a small boy walked up to him as asked, “What are you doing here?”“I’m helping,” Charlie snapped back, “just like everyone else.”

Charlie looked up to see a room so quiet you could hear a pin drop. From the look on everyone’s face, he must have reacted too harshly. The adults stared. Many of the children had their mouth’s wide open in awe. “Was this really Charlie?” their looks seemed to ask.

Charlie stayed most of the day and into the evening. He helped load food into the car trunks of families, make beds, and sort clothes. At the end of his time, he gave the person in charge of the shelter a sealed envelope.

“Here,” Charlie said in a half whisper, “this should help.” And he left. The shelter supervisor opened the envelope and found $200 in tens and twenties.

When Charlie got home, he knew he was different. He changed. Did others see the change in him? This was a thought Charlie immediately dismissed as unimportant. Others would probably keep to their opinions about him. But Charlie finally knew the real worth of money, because he finally knew people were more important.”

--Larry Broding word-sunday.com, adapted

The story of Zacchaeus is more than a cute children’s song. The story of Zacchaeus is a powerful story of God’s love and grace.

May we accept that such grace is also promised to us today, simply because of who we are in the eyes of God. May we accept that such love calls us back into right relationship with God, through faith in Christ Jesus. May we accept that such a mission to seek out and save the lost can also be our mission today, as followers of Jesus.

May our eyes be opened, our hearts warmed, our lives transformed by God’s amazing grace, this day and every day.

May it be so. Let us pray.