

Luke 18:35-43, 19:1-10

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Samantha Evans

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A Meditation on Giving

I remember the very first time I heard this gospel story. It was when I was in high school in youth group. And my youth group leader always had a knack for relating the Scripture stories to things happening in our lives or relating the gospel characters to people we knew. And for this particular story, our leader decided to liken Zacchaeus to another kid, who didn't attend youth group, but who we all knew, who was short in stature, and also pretty rich.

And as I look back on this, it makes me feel a bit uncomfortable that our leader compared him in this way, because in the end Zacchaeus turns out to be a good guy, a model Christian, but the story does not begin that way. And also, Jesus forgives him and lifts him up, which actually made the crowds grumble and hate him even more.

And so, it wasn't a great comparison, that my youth leader made, but it did help us imagine the scene. And it obviously stuck with me for quite some time. Because it is borderline ridiculous to imagine a person of considerable wealth and status, hiking up their robe and climbing a tree in their sandals, just to catch a glimpse of this poor, strange, traveler talking about salvation, and the kingdom of heaven, and giving your possessions away to the poor.

But this story is even more scandalous than it appears. And that's because Zacchaeus wasn't just a short, rich man, he was a swindler, a cheat, a manipulator, who extorted his own neighbors and made his fortune off the backs of the poor and oppressed in his very own community. He worked for Rome, the empire that occupied his land and his fellow people. He betrayed his own and for that, he was despised by his entire community.

So you see, the scandal of this story is not so much that a short, rich man scurried up a tree. The scandal is that Jesus took notice of Zacchaeus. He knew where to find him. He knew his name. And not only, that but he insisted that he stay at his house.

Receive his hospitality. Commune and dine with him, who, if you've been paying attention as the crowds had been, you know that he stands in contrast to everything that Jesus had been preaching. For it is quite plausible that the blind man outside the gate, the one Jesus had just healed, was homeless because Zacchaeus defrauded him out of every denarius he had ever had.

The real scandal is that even though the crowds try to silence the blind, pitiful beggar, Jesus takes notice of him and offers him healing, grace, and salvation. And then to the chagrin of those same crowds, he turns around and extends that healing, grace and salvation to Zacchaeus, a swindler, a cheat, and a sinner against God and against neighbor.

Jesus is committed to seeking out “the lost.” And that includes all of society’s outcasts and despised sinners, the blind man and Zacchaeus and everyone in between, because Jesus is working to bring down the whole system. And to build in its place a connected, reconciled community where relationships are restored, where the lost are found, where the people turn back to their God and toward one another. Where no one goes without while another cheats and hoards. Where no one is forgotten or despised but all are named beloved and good and worthy children of God.

Jesus gave a gift to this entire community. He offered holistic, communal restoration for all and to all. The serious scandal of the gospel is that Jesus grants salvation for the oppressed, for the oppressor, and for everyone in between.

Having received this scandalous good news for all, we shall try to locate ourselves within this story. Some of us will relate most to the blind beggar, cast out of society, pushed to the margins because of systems of white supremacy, misogyny, or homophobia.

Sometimes we may find ourselves in the crowds. Telling the oppressed to keep quiet, preventing them from speaking their truth and finding their healing. Or we may find ourselves, champions for the poor and the oppressed, grumbling when someone who has betrayed us and our community, is somehow given mercy and grace.

And if we’re really honest with ourselves and with our God, then we must grapple with the fact that in one way or another, we will all find ourselves in the tree with Zacchaeus. Maybe not because of the way we make our money, but certainly because of the ways we spend it.

The food we buy, the clothes we wear, or the investments we hold. The myriad ways we invest in the empire and prop up systems of oppression which exploit the poor, destroy the planet, and perpetuate sin and suffering, for the oppressed, and for our very selves.

I sometimes feel crippled by this thought. Paralyzed by the injustices in our society that feel, or sometimes actually are, inescapable.

Which is why this story is such a gift of grace. For Zacchaeus may have been rich, but he wasn't happy. He was hated, mistrusted, totally and completely unreconciled to his community. And Jesus offered to him the only thing that the empire could not: to mend his relationship to his God and to his community. Jesus offered him salvation from the grip of sin and greed that led him to cause his neighbor so much suffering.

And in response to this gift, Zacchaeus scrambled down the tree and received Jesus with a kind of overwhelming joy. Something I find interesting is that Zacchaeus' name in Hebrew means "innocent" or "clean," which to the community would have felt like a tragic irony.

That is until this fateful day when Zacchaeus finally lived up to his name. On this fateful day, when the poor, blind beggar, and the grumbling crowd, and the rich man were finally reconciled back to God and back to one another.

Something you should know about chief tax collectors, is that at that time the only way they made any money at all was by collecting more tax than they were commanded to by Rome. Which means that every last denarius Zacchaeus had ever collected for himself was done so deceitfully. And so his commitment to pay back four fold any he has defrauded means that he will be left with nothing.

But that didn't matter, because salvation had come to his house that day. He finally understood the restoration and salvation that Jesus was bringing to the world. And he was ready to respond.¹

This Stewardship season we have been exploring the grand story of salvation. The many ways in which God acts first and invites God's people to respond in kind. On this Consecration Sunday, we are invited to consider how we might respond to the reckless and scandalous gift of grace we have been offered.

We are invited to consider the love and the joy and the hope we experience at this Table, in these pews, in this city with our fellow siblings.

¹ Missional theologian, David Bosch, puts it this way: "Luke undoubtedly wishes to communicate... God's preferential option for the poor, but does not exclude God's concern for the rich, but, in fact, stresses it for... Luke wishes his readers to know that there is hope for the rich, insofar as they act and serve in solidarity with the poor and oppressed. In their being converted to God, rich and poor are converted toward each other." David J. Bosch. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Otis Books: Maryknoll, New York (1991). pg. 104.

We are invited to remember the love and care and healing we receive after surgery, after childbirth, after we lose someone we loved.

We are invited to remember the guidance and the patience and the kindness we receive when we are struggling to understand a person or a culture that is unfamiliar to us, or when we are faced with a difficult decision, in our lives, in our Session, in our committees.

We are invited to remember the grace and the forgiveness and the relief we receive when we mess up, when we get it wrong, and we hurt those we love.

We are invited to remember these immeasurable gifts of love and restoration, of hope and salvation. We are invited to respond to God's radical gift of grace. And like Zacchaeus, we are invited to respond with uncompromising generosity and joy and hope that when we offer of ourselves, we and our entire community will be transformed.

In this way, our financial pledge that we shall make for the coming year is not the culmination of our response to God. It is the beginning. It is the joy we declare when we shimmy out of that tree and receive the gift we have been given. It is the hopeful declaration that there is enough, that God has given us enough and we will find our purpose, our joy, and our transformation in using what God has given us to heal our broken world.

Sometimes we joke that agreeing to volunteer for one little thing, like give someone a ride, may lead to becoming a Deacon, which may lead to becoming the Moderator of Deacons, which may lead to any number of responsibilities we *mostly* willingly accept. We joke about it, but it happens all the time.

And frequently that is because once we start giving, we just can't stop. Generosity begets generosity. Service begets service. The more we offer of ourselves, our time, our talents, and our treasure, the more we will want to. Seeing and participating in and experiencing the transformation that comes with offering of ourselves is worth the cost every single time. And once we've tasted, we simply won't be able to get enough.

And so today, my friends, let us remember the freely given gift of grace and love we have received, and let us seek to respond with a hopeful declaration of the transformation that God is bringing about for us, our church, our city, our nation, and our world.

In the name of the Triune God, who Creates, Sustains, and Redeems us all. AMEN.