

Beloved Community
Luke 19:1-10
October 1, 2023
Pastor Sarah Wiles

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through town. A man there named Zacchaeus, a ruler among tax collectors, was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but, being a short man, he couldn't because of the crowd. So, he ran ahead and climbed up a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus, who was about to pass that way. When Jesus came to that spot, he looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, come down at once. I must stay in your home today." So, Zacchaeus came down at once, happy to welcome Jesus.

Everyone who saw this grumbled, saying, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."

Zacchaeus stopped and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord, I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone, I repay them four times as much."

Jesus said to him, "Today, salvation has come to this household because he too is a son of Abraham. The Human One came to seek and save the lost."

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Oh, Zacchaeus. Bless his heart. He was short. And no one's ever going to forget it.

He also wasn't nice. He was a boss of the tax collectors. Tax collectors were bad people—or probably a better way of putting it is that they made bad choices, choices that harmed others. They collected taxes for the Romans. In other words, they're collaborators with the occupying army. They were traitors.

Zacchaeus heard that Jesus was going to be passing through, and he wanted to see who Jesus was. It doesn't say why. It just says he wanted to see.

So, Zacchaeus joins the crowd. But a crowd is a difficult place for a short person, and a dangerous place for someone as hated as Zacchaeus.

So, he climbs a tree.

On one hand it's completely sensible. But it's also totally ridiculous. A grown man, the most powerful in town, scampering up a tree like a child. Zacchaeus hasn't even met Jesus, and Jesus is already making him do strange things.

So, he climbed up the tree, where he was safe. He could just watch, see who this Jesus was.

Suddenly, Jesus is right there, at the base of the tree, looking up. Right at Zacchaeus. He sees him.

I wonder when the last time was that Zacchaeus was really seen—not for what he represented, not for what he'd done, but just for himself.

Jesus sees him, and says, “I’m coming over to your house.”

Think of what Jesus *could* have said: Zacchaeus, I see you. And I know what you’ve done. Zacchaeus, I see you. And I’m disappointed in you. Zacchaeus, I see you. And you need to make some changes. Or even, Zacchaeus, I see you. Your sins are forgiven.

But Jesus doesn’t say any of that. He just invites himself over for dinner. Like things are fine.

When we imagine Jesus, do we imagine him like this? Where Jesus just likes us? Even when we’ve made bad choices?

The crowd wants a different Jesus. They want Jesus to say some of those other things: I know what you’ve done; I’m disappointed in you; you need to make some changes. That’s what Jesus *should* say. I mean, doesn’t Jesus know all that good food they’re going to enjoy tonight was bought with *their* blood, sweat, and tears? Jesus is just going to give him a pass? It’s not fair. Which is true. The gospel isn’t fair. Thank goodness.

Then maybe the most unpredictable part of the story happens. Zacchaeus experiences Jesus’ unconditional acceptance, and he stops. He declares: today, from now on, it’s going to be different. I’ll give away half of my ill-gotten gains. I’ll repay anyone I’ve cheated four times. Zacchaeus decides—in response to that unconditional acceptance—to make reparations, to try to repair the harm he’s done.

A phrase Dr. Martin Luther King used a lot in talking about the goals of the civil rights movement was “Beloved Community.” He picked it up from an earlier philosopher named Josiah Royce. In King’s understanding, Beloved Community wasn’t just a lot of folks who like each other and share similar values and get along. That’s what I like, but beloved community is more.

We mostly romanticize King and the other leaders of the civil rights movement today. We forget how deeply divisive the movement was. Folks from all corners criticized their methods, and they often faced particular pushback from people on their side. The impulse to demonize Bull Connor, Strom Thurmond, George Wallace, Bob Jones was as strong as our impulse to demonize some folks we disagree with today. Folks felt like these people had made such hateful, harmful choices that the only reasonable goal was to defeat them, get rid of them. I get that.

But King and others who used non-violent tactics took the radical position that their work would not be complete until these folks, too, were redeemed, reconciled, restored to their right mind. Hatred hurts everyone involved—the victims, yes, but the perpetrators, too. It deforms the soul. Zacchaeus harmed others; that’s without question. But his theft and participation in the occupation also damaged him, cut him off from loving God and neighbor and self.

In the months after the success of the Montgomery bus boycott in 1956, King didn’t gloat. In various settings he said, “We have refused in our struggle to succumb to the

temptation of becoming bitter and indulging in a hate campaign. We are not out to defeat or to humiliate [white people]. We are out to help [them] as well as ourselves. The festering sore of segregation debilitates [white people] as well as [us]...”¹

“The end is the creation of a society where [all] will live together as [siblings]. [The] end is not retaliation but redemption.”² “

“...the end is the creation of the beloved community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love than can transform opponents into friends... It is this type of understanding goodwill that will transform the deep gloom of the old age into the exuberant gladness of the new age.”³

I don't know if I have the soul force for that kind of love. At least not yet. I don't know if I ever will. But I do know that the most profound changes in my life have been motivated by being loved, not by shame, or guilt, or even logic. Being loved enough that I could trust that I would still be accepted even after I admitted what I'd done wrong is the only thing that's truly brought about change in my life.

We have to start from a deep assurance of our beloved-ness. We have to try to give that to one another.

Jesus saw Zacchaeus—all of Zacchaeus. And even knowing the worst, he still wanted to break bread with him. And that changed everything. It brought Zacchaeus back into the community where he could begin to repair the harm he'd done. It brought him into the beloved community. May we do the same for one another.

~ Sarah W. Wiles, 2023

¹ <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/montgomery-story-address-delivered-forty-seventh-annual-naacp-convention>

² <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/birth-new-age-address-delivered-11-august-1956-fiftieth-anniversary-alpha-phi>

³ http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/Vol03Scans/451_3-Dec-1956_Facing%20the%20Challenge%20of%20a%20New%20Age.pdf