

## Proper 26C 2016 Sermon

### *Luke 19:1-10 (CEB)*

<sup>1</sup> Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through town. <sup>2</sup> A man there named Zacchaeus, a ruler among tax collectors, was rich. <sup>3</sup> He was trying to see who Jesus was, but, being a short man, he couldn't because of the crowd. <sup>4</sup> So he ran ahead and climbed up a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus, who was about to pass that way. <sup>5</sup> When Jesus came to that spot, he looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, come down at once. I must stay in your home today." <sup>6</sup> So Zacchaeus came down at once, happy to welcome Jesus. <sup>7</sup> Everyone who saw this grumbled, saying, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner." <sup>8</sup> 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." <sup>9</sup> Jesus said to him, "Today, salvation has come to this household because he too is a son of Abraham. <sup>10</sup> The Human One came to seek and save the lost."

The story of Zacchaeus is a familiar story, not least because we like to tell it to our children. Children's Bible Storybooks love to illustrate Zacchaeus up in the tree, and they point out to children that, although Zacchaeus was smaller than other people his same age, Jesus noticed him and chose to eat dinner at his house. When I was a kid, my Sunday School teacher used the ancient but effective technology of the flannel board to tell the story. We even write children's songs about Zacchaeus, the "wee little man"!

We adults are also familiar with the traditional *interpretation* of this story, which Professor David Lose summarizes as: "Jesus seeks out Zacchaeus, a notorious chief tax collector; Zacchaeus, overwhelmed by the presence of Jesus, repents of his sin and promises he will make amends; [then] acknowledging Zacchaeus' repentance, Jesus declares that salvation has come to this house."<sup>1</sup>

But there are some problems with this traditional interpretation of the story, as Dr. Lose and other modern scholars are quick to point out; for in the story, neither Jesus nor Zacchaeus says anything about sin *or* repentance! It is the *crowd* that judges Zacchaeus to be sinful (tax collectors were a hated class of people) and it is the crowd who grumbles about Jesus associating with him. But why should we assume that Jesus *agrees* with the crowd's assessment of Zacchaeus, when in last week's Gospel story about another tax collector and a Pharisee, Jesus pronounced the tax collector justified, while the Pharisee was not. Jesus often had a *very* different assessment of people than the crowds did.

Of course, *we* are not principally to blame for misinterpreting the story of Zacchaeus, since Bible **translators** themselves, with only a few exceptions, mistranslate the Greek of this passage in order to make it fit with their predisposed bias which sees sin as central and repentance as necessary before Jesus will fully accept and forgive someone. Even the New Revised Standard Version, which we read every Sunday, gets it wrong. You see, what translators overwhelmingly do is change the present tense in the original Greek of this passage to the future tense. Zacchaeus thus says, "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 clear implication is that he is **NOT** currently doing these things, but promises that he *will* in the future. Yet the original Greek verb tense is **not future**, but *present tense*.<sup>2</sup> *The Message* translation gets it right, as does the

*Contemporary English Bible*, in which Zacchaeus says, “Lord, I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone [unknowingly], I **repay** them four times as much.” These are Zacchaeus’ *customary practices*, **not** something he is only *now* promising he **will** do in the future.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus sees Zacchaeus as “a child of Abraham” to whose household salvation – the Kingdom of God – has come, *not* because Zacchaeus has repented of some grievous sin, but because he is *extremely* generous to the poor and joyously welcomes Jesus into *his* home, showing the same generous hospitality as Abraham did. This tells Jesus that Zacchaeus is open to the kingdom. (Johnson) The **crowd** looks at Zacchaeus and sees only “a sinner;” Jesus looks at Zacchaeus and sees a child of Abraham: generous and hospitable, someone through whom – like Abraham – God could bless the world.

I have just finished listening to N.T. Wright’s newest book,<sup>4</sup> in which Bishop Wright points out that generations of Christians – including himself, in the past – have missed the truly **Biblical** understanding of the cross because we have superimposed over the Biblical texts our idea that Jesus died for the sole purpose that *we* might go to heaven. If our predisposed biases are so strong that **Bible** translators knowingly mistranslate the original Greek text in order to agree with their *own* interpretation (which they are sure is the **right** one, rather than what the text says), and brilliant scholars such as Tom Wright discover they have misinterpreted the Bible because of their presuppositions, that should raise the question about how you and I may have been reading the Bible and interpreting the Christian faith in ways that support our own biases and predispositions; ways that support our ego identity. At the very least, it should give us pause and open us to the possibility of seeing things we have long seen from one particular point of view from a new perspective. Admitting that we may have had a distorted vision of things, and now seeing them from a new perspective.

The fact is, **seeing** is a central theme in today’s Gospel story, as in Luke’s Gospel as a whole. “The key to this story,” notes David Lose, “is not sin and forgiveness but sight.”<sup>1</sup> Zacchaeus is trying to see who Jesus is, but because he is short, the crowd keeps him from seeing. (I wonder: Does the crowd keep us from seeing who Jesus is?) Zacchaeus goes to a place where he can see more clearly, from a different perspective. Jesus looks up and sees him and invites himself to Zacchaeus’ house. Why? Because, unlike the crowd, Jesus *sees* Zacchaeus. Really **sees** him, when so many in the crowd despise and ignore him. (paraphrasing David Lose) Jesus also saw the heart of the tax collector and the heart of the Pharisee in last week’s Gospel, and came to a very different conclusion than others in the Temple who saw these two men. In both last week’s Gospel and this week’s, Jesus looks at a tax collector and sees something very different from what the overwhelming majority of people saw, because of their predisposed biases. Scholar Luke Timothy Johnson writes, “The most obvious moral lesson taught by the juxtaposition of these stories is that appearances can deceive.” (Johnson, p. 287)

Appearances can deceive. My friends, that is certainly true for me, and probably true for you, also. What we **think** we see is not always reality. We think we know the message of the Bible, but then even such a famous and respected scholar as Tom Wright realizes he’s been seeing it wrong all along. We have sorted people out, judged them and put labels on them: “homeless,”

“ex-con,” “Muslim,” “migrant,” “filthy rich,” “addict,” “mentally ill,” only to discover that the way **Jesus** sees them and names them is very different, indeed.

“Jesus cares about those who are on the edge,” notes David Lose. “Throughout [Luke’s] Gospel, Jesus encounters those whom society has declared unfit and wants to ignore and he *sees* them, recognizes them, seeks them out, spends time with them, and in all these ways honors and blesses them... [T]he God we encounter in Jesus doesn’t care about **our** sense of justice or fairness or any of the other ways *we* seek to order our world. The only thing this God cares about is seeing – and seeking out – the lost and bringing them home again. God’s love routinely trumps justice and God’s compassion overrides all of our sense of fairness.

“Which can be rather upsetting – whether to the crowds of Zacchaeus’ day or to us. *Until*, that is, **we** are the ones who are down and out, made to feel invisible, whether because of our actions or those of others, whether because of illness or loss, whether because of our gender or race or age or sexuality or whatever. Whenever we feel, on the outside, abandoned, invisible...that’s when we need a God who sees us, seeks after us, and promises to bring us home.”<sup>1</sup>

And because of Jesus, we can be assured that that is exactly the kind of God we have.

Let us pray:

All-seeing God, have compassion upon us in our blindness and short-sightedness. Teach us not to label others, which only causes us to be blind to the infinitely valuable person underneath the label who was created in your image and likeness. Help us not to readily accept the labels that *other* members of society have placed on people or classes of people, for Jesus clearly does not see people the way *society* sees them. Give us the humility to accept that those opinions and judgments we are so *certain* of may, in fact, be utterly wrong; and give us the courage to change, when we discover this to be true. Help us to be extravagantly generous and unreservedly hospitable, after the example of Zacchaeus, so that salvation may also happen in **our** house; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

AMEN.

1 <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/10/pen-24-c-reformation-the-unexpected-god/>

2 Professor Lose writes (*ibid.*): “Many versions of the Bible translate Zacchaeus’ statement as referring to future action, even though they are clearly present tense verbs in the Greek. To justify that decision, they argue that this is an instance of the “future-present tense” in Greek. Curiously, there is *no other instance* in biblical or classical Greek literature of a “future-present tense,” which means that translators actually made up a grammatical category to justify their poor translations. Why? Because we really, really want God to conform to our expectations. Once again, we don’t get the God we expect, but rather the one we need. Thanks be to God!

3 See Lose, *ibid.*; also see Luke Timothy Johnson, “*Luke*,” Sacra Pagina series, Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991, pp. 283-288; and Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *The Gospel*

*According to Luke (X-XXIV)*, The Anchor Bible series, New York: Doubleday, 1985, pp. 1218-1227.

<sup>4</sup> *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus's Crucifixion*