A Short Man Standing Tall

All-Saints Sunday 2019

Luke 19:1-10

*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. Luke 19:8*

Two occasions in my life have made me feel kinship with the “wee little man,” as the Sunday School ditty describes the main character in this story, Zacchaeus. The first occurred when I was a student at UH. I was a member of the Olivet Baptist Church back then, back when I was a member of the Southern Baptist church. Olivet, as some of you may know is there on Beretania St., close to Central Union Church. One Sunday, midday after the morning worship service, crowds began gathering on the sidewalk outside the church. Newly-elected president John F. Kennedy was in town for a meeting and in the hoopla leading up to the meeting, Kennedy was to parade down the street and make his way to the East West Center at the university. Already four or five deep on the sidewalk, the crowd made it difficult for me to see. Finding a short tree just outside the church, I was able to climb up and get a bird’s eye view of the procession as it slowly went by. I could see President Kennedy as well as I can see you who sit in the front pews.

The second occasion that made me commiserate with Zacchaeus happened one year when I was living in Ohio. One of the biggest tournaments of the year came to the Firestone Country Club in Akron. A friend of mine gave me a ticket and we went down to see the tournament. Tiger Woods was at his peak back then and was leading the tournament in the final moments of the match. I decided to follow him on those last few holes. By the time I got there, the crowd was already ten or twelve deep, lining the whole fairway. If I stood on my tiptoe, I could make out the top of his head as he drove off the tee. Oh well. At least I was there. He won, by the way, just as he did this past weekend.

This ***short*** passage – sorry for the pun – describes Zacchaeus with three words. He was short, rich, and a pariah. No explanation needed on the short part; he simply was vertically challenged. A few of us in this room can commiserate. But he was also rich, serving as the IRS agent in charge of the Jerusalem office for the hated Roman occupiers. It was a well-paying job; he got a percentage of what he took in. And he did it well. He also took a cut of the other tax collectors who worked under him. Nobody likes paying taxes, even if you’re the most honest tax collector, and many of them weren’t. Which led to the third thing Luke has to say about Zacchaeus: he was a social outcast. Even if you were a practicing Jew, which Zacchaeus was, it did not matter. You work for the Roman oppressors, you’re one of them. It was guilt by association.

Will Campbell was a fiery Baptist minister in southern US during the civil rights struggle. A friend and colleague to Martin Luther King, Dick Gregory, and John Lewis, he worked tirelessly for the cause. But he was highly criticized because he was noted to be a chaplain to the Ku Klux Klan. In response to those critics, he simply said: “Mr. Jesus died for bigots as well.”

Short, rich, and hated. This is the Zacchaeus that Luke offers to us. Ninety-nine percent of the sermons I have heard preached about Zacchaeus – and I’ve preached my share – go something like this. Zacchaeus was an immoral tax collector. Jesus reached out to him and he came to faith. As a result of his new-found faith, he resolved to be a changed man. Jesus, in affirming his faith, tells him he will go to his house to eat and fellowship with the new newly converted one. The self-righteous Jews, observing this encounter, criticize Jesus for hanging around with such a despicable character. Zacchaeus, for his part, tells Jesus he will go so far as to make restitution for his past cheating by giving back half of his ill-gotten gains to the poor and, if he has cheated someone, he will repay them four times as much as the amount for which he has bilked them. Jesus then pronounces him transformed.

But is that Luke’s intention and message to us? Is this a story of how a bad person saw the light and came to faith? I have always thought so. Back when we here in the Hawaii Conference were doing the apology to Native Hawaiians resolution and redress, this passage was a north star for me. It told me that, like Zacchaeus, we had to make amends in real ways to Native Hawaiians for what we did in the past.

But I’ve changed my mind. A lot of how you look at this story pivots around how you interpret verse 19:8. The Greek verbs used here has been translated in the future tense: “I **will** give back half my possessions and I **will** repay fourfold if I have cheated anyone. Indeed, many of the translations say literally that.

The second option is to render the verbs as a "progressive present tense." The Common English Bible, my go-to translation these days, translates this verse: “Look, Lord, I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone, I repay them four times as much.” In this reading, Zacchaeus is a hidden saint about whom people have made all sorts of false assumptions about his corruption. And so, he defends himself: "Lord, I always give half of my wealth to the poor, and whenever I discover any fraud or discrepancy I always make a fourfold restitution."

The crowd had demonized Zacchaeus. Jesus praises him as "a son of Abraham."

           I like the second reading. It fits with the many times in Luke’s gospel that Jesus calls out good people who are bad and commends bad people who are in reality good.

           Luke has already mentioned several unlikely heroes — the faith of a Roman soldier, a "good" Samaritan, a shrewd manager who was commended for his dishonesty, a Samaritan leper who was the only person to give thanks for his healing, and a tax collector who was commended as more righteous than a sanctimonious Pharisee.

           So maybe the story is not about a sinner who shocks us by repenting, but about the crowd that demonizes a person it doesn't like with all sorts of false assumptions. He must be a bad man; he works for the Romans, they surmise.

           Elizabeth Kaeton, an Episcopal priest, thus observes about this passage, with a nod to Halloween: "Jesus is once again turning our world upside down, confronting us with our assumptions about who is good and who is evil and demonstrating for us the tricks we play in our minds before we treat one another — one way or another. Like the crowd murmuring about Zacchaeus, it is easy to be blinded by our prejudice of 'those people' and find ourselves accusing the very person or people we should be emulating."

We can get so judge-y in our worst moments. Why aren’t they living up to how good Christians should? Why aren’t they doing more than they are? We even turn on our own leaders and blame them, while we sit on the sidelines throwing stones? These good, respectable people are the very people Jesus turns on in this passage. Zacchaeus, which literally means, *pure or holy one* is the alternative model Jesus uses.

Luke is writing to his own community 50 years after Jesus' death. His Jesus is not talking to the people of Jericho; those people living on the last stop to Jerusalem; he is talking to Luke's folk fifty years after Jesus died, and now to us, at our last stop. And however we read it, the problem in this story is not Zacchaeus; it is us. Are our eyes opened (18:35-43) or are we grumbling?

Are we learning, like Jesus, shedding our wealth, giving our lives, or do we think we know what people are like, and what God thinks of them?

Do we restrict God's grace to the nice people like us? If we do then Zacchaeus is an honourable man, but we are like the rich young ruler Jesus has just told us about in the previous chapter, holding on to the riches of our prejudices and preconceptions, walking away sadly, stuck in our trees, locking our doors. We are settling down in Jericho and going no further. We are the ones coming up short.