July 30, 2017
Luke 19:1-10

Children’s Bible Stories All Grown Up: Zacchaeus

Rev. Kerry Smith
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Luke 19:1-10 Common English Bible

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.”

Do you remember the children’s song about Zacchaeus? Do you know it? “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 walked that way, 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.’” Well, today we are looking at the story of the children’s Bible story of Zacchaeus, and I have some rather disturbing news. If you look at the Zacchaeus story in the original Greek, it says, “He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature.” By the time we get to the third “he” of that sentence, we don’t know which “he” was the short one. It could be that Jesus was short, not Zacchaeus. The song could be totally wrong.

Luke actually sets up the story of Zacchaeus the chapter before with the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector praying in the temple. You remember the Pharisee’s prayer, “God, thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, evildoers, adulterers—especially THIS tax collector” (Luke 18:11). Tax collectors were considered “those people,” they were not just immoral but seen as traitors. Roman officials contracted with local entrepreneurs like Zacchaeus to collect the taxes in a given area. The tax collector would then pay the prescribed tax for the area in advance and then pay others to collect the taxes with the hope that the amount collected would yield a profit.[[1]](#footnote-2) This system was filled with abuse and Jews who collected taxes for the Romans were assumed to be dishonest and were hated by other Jews for their complicity with the Gentile oppressors.

Zacchaeus was the chief tax collector and he was rich. Being rich is not a good thing in Luke’s gospel. In Luke 6:24 Jesus has a series of woes on the rich. “How terrible that you are rich, because you have already received your comfort.” In Luke 12 God calls a rich farmer a fool and requires his soul (Luke 12:20). In Luke 16 a rich man dies and goes to Hades and the poor Lazarus is taken to the bosom of Abraham (Luke 16:23).

Right before this encounter with Jesus and Zacchaeus, Jesus has a conversation with the rich ruler who was too attached to his possessions to give them up and become a disciple. Jesus says that line we all remember about how hard it is for a rich person to enter into the kingdom of God. It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter into God’s kingdom (Luke 18:25). Ouch. Being rich is not necessarily a good thing in Luke’s gospel because it can be an impediment to the Gospel. Zacchaeus was rich, a rich chief tax collector. Just like the crowd watching Jesus’ parade that day, we are not supposed to like Zacchaeus.

So when Jesus stops and calls out Zacchaeus by name, we are shocked. Why on earth would Jesus seek out Zacchaeus? Jesus stops the entire parade for this man. He called him by name. The name Zacchaeus means “pure” in Hebrew. What a joke, pure? He was the rich, chief tax collector who cheated people. He wasn’t pure and Jesus calls him by name. Not only that, Jesus tells him to hurry on down because the party is coming to Zacchaeus house. By going to Zacchaeus’ house, Jesus is crossing a barrier of ritual purity.[[2]](#footnote-3) A tax collector would regularly be unclean because they were entering people’s houses and inspecting their goods. Jesus was honoring Zacchaeus by offering to receive hospitality from him.

We teach our children not to invite themselves over to people’s houses, and here is Jesus inviting himself over to Zacchaeus’ house. By doing so, Jesus is offering Zacchaeus an opportunity to be recognized before the whole community. Jesus is lifting up this man who had stooped to running and climbing a tree.[[3]](#footnote-4) Zacchaeus tumbles down out of the tree, excited and rejoicing because Jesus not only called his name, but he is coming to his house. Zacchaeus is a grateful, joyful, and excited follower of Jesus. But Zacchaeus is bad, we don’t like him. He isn’t supposed to care about Jesus. He isn’t supposed to respond to Jesus. He isn’t supposed to be happy about Jesus coming to his house.

Zacchaeus falls out of that tree and leads Jesus and the whole parade to his house. Jesus and the crook walking together. And then in front of everyone, Zacchaeus makes this promise, not using future verbs but present tense verbs. Not I will do this or I will do that. Not I will spend more time with my children this weekend. Or I will do that later, depending on my work schedule. Zacchaeus speaks of what he is going to do right then and there: Half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have cheated anyone, I will repay them four times as much. That is far more generous than the religious law required. It seems like there is some connection between generosity and joy. Zacchaeus is filled with joy and he becomes generous.

There is simply no way that we would ever have assumed that someone like Zacchaeus would respond so completely to Jesus. Jesus called Zacchaeus by name, he went to Zacchaeus house, he saw Zacchaeus for who he really was. Jesus didn’t just assume that he knew Zacchaeus based on his job or what he owned. Jesus embraces Zacchaeus and Zacchaeus immediately changes direction and begins the journey of becoming a different kind of person. Jesus didn’t ask Zacchaeus to do any of those things. Jesus didn’t say, “Okay, I have called you by name and come to your house, and so now you have to do this and this for your salvation.”

Zacchaeus made that decision himself to respond to Jesus with his whole heart and his whole life. Jesus then reminds Zacchaeus who and whose he is, “He too is a son of Abraham.” Yes, he is a rich, chief tax collector but he is also a son of Abraham and Sarah, part of the covenant, child of God. This is a story where unexpected things happen. Salvation can come even to the house of a tax collector. Zacchaeus thought he was seeking to see Jesus but in reality Jesus was seeking Zacchaeus.

What do we say in these days when it is easy to lose heart? This is a story that is an antidote to pessimism.[[4]](#footnote-5) This is a story for those who feel defeated and hopeless. This is a day for us to open our eyes to what God is doing all around us. Today someone is offered forgiveness, or someone hears a word of affirmation or someone clings to hope that life can be different or someone resolves to live by a new set of values.[[5]](#footnote-6) This is the kingdom of God at work.

We think that we know who people are and that they cannot change. This a story that wakes us up to our prejudice. We can’t give up on people. We can’t write people off. We can’t assume that people will never change because today came for Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was changed from someone who turned the screws on his own people to benefit himself into a happy man who gave away much of what he had.[[6]](#footnote-7)

We can’t give up on ourselves, we can’t write ourselves off. Yes, today can be a new beginning for us too. Zacchaeus was imprisoned by his own greed and ambition, and Jesus set him free. Anyone here imprisoned by your insistence that everything you have belongs to you? What is holding you back? Zacchaeus “accepted Jesus’ laser-like, love-infused offer to be free of his status as an errand boy for the bad guys.”[[7]](#footnote-8) Can we say yes to the “hope-producing, despair-crushing” love of Jesus?”[[8]](#footnote-9)

Jesus offered Zacchaeus new life. This story tells us that Jesus is offering us new life today also. Jesus is calling us by name, he is coming to our house, he sees us for who we really are. Will we say yes?

1. New Interpreter’s Bible. Volume 9. Luke. P. 356. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. New Interpreter’s Bible. Volume 9. Luke. P. 358. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. New Interpreter’s Bible. Volume 9. Luke. P. 358. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. New Interpreter’s Bible. Volume 9. Luke. P. 359. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. New Interpreter’s Bible. Volume 9. Luke. P. 360. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. From Rev. John Thornburg’s sermon at Greenland Hills on October 30, 2016 celebating the 75th anniversary of GHUMC. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. From Rev. John Thornburg’s sermon at Greenland Hills on October 30, 2016 celebating the 75th anniversary of GHUMC. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. From Rev. John Thornburg’s sermon at Greenland Hills on October 30, 2016 celebating the 75th anniversary of GHUMC. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)