

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Luke 19:1-10

Isaiah 1:10-18

Psalm 32:1-8

2 Thes. 1:1-4,11-12

October 30, 2022

The Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

Who remembers the song about Zacchaeus that we sang as little kids?

Zacchaeus he 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 came 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.

Maybe you loved that song as much as I did. Now...what was the central theme we were told the story was teaching? For many of us, it was a story about repentance and new life. In the narrative many of us learned when we were little – the equation was simple...we repent, we ask for forgiveness and our lives are changed for ever and ever. And, we too, could change and let go of our sinful ways just like Zaccheaus.

But there's a complication to this equation. Depending on the translation of the bible that you read, Zacchaeus' actions are either translated in the future, which is how our reading today is translated...Zacchaeus says he *will* give to the poor and he *will* payback four times as much as he took.

He promises to change his ways for good, never to be tempted to go back to his old self. But, is life ever really that simple? Is our desire to do good without complications? Is our commitment to change, our repentance, without stumbling blocks?

I want to suggest that there is a much richer way to understand the story of Zacchaeus...one that helps us understand that our journey to new life can be more challenging than just climbing down from a tree. Let's look at a different translation of this story.

Verse 8 in the King James translation states this..."Then Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord, I *give* half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I *restore* fourfold." Notice that this is a very different way to understand this text. In the King James translation Zacchaeus' giving isn't a future possibility...it's a present reality. This is so interesting.

So where does the idea of repentance come in to play if Zacchaeus is already doing good work? Let's consider more about Zacchaeus' life while we assume that he is in fact currently doing good things to help the poor.

We know a few things about his work life. Zacchaeus is a tax collector and he is a rich tax collector. We also know that tax collectors were hated. This was not a job you grew up aspiring to do.

Zacchaeus is also a Jew. That means he was a Jew working for the Roman state, collecting taxes for those in power. He is basically a traitor to his own people for the sake of a political cause or maybe for some sense of his own place in Roman society. The fact that he is wealthy on top of that tells us that he was probably gaining at least some of his wealth through subversive means. The job in and of itself probably wouldn't have made him rich.

Knowing those facts makes our story easily understood through the first lens...that through repenting of these bad choices, Zacchaeus will change his life from that day forward.

But...can Zacchaeus be this misguided person and still do good work? Can he be actively cheating some while helping others? Can he be both saint and sinner?

Understanding Zacchaeus as a complex individual trying to do good on the one hand while living a sinful life on the other seems much more in line with who we really are. Life is rarely as straightforward as coming down from the sycamore tree, repenting and never making another mistake.

How many of us do the right thing some of the time and justify bending the rules when it's convenient or acting in less than ethical ways when faced with pressure from peers or co-workers or working at job that may hurt others or the environment because we need the paycheck? How often do we walk the line of moral integrity? This is really how I think Zacchaeus was living.

As Parker Palmer so eloquently states in an essay on living a changed life,

"There's often a distressing disconnect between the good words we speak and the way we live our lives. In personal relations and politics, the mass media, the academy and organized religion, our good words tend to float away even as they leave our lips, ascending to an altitude where they neither reflect nor connect with the human condition.... We long for words like love, truth, and justice to become flesh and dwell among us. But in our violent world, it's risky business to wrap our frail flesh around words like those, and we don't like the odds."

The prophet Isaiah makes this point very clearly. In our reading this morning God is angry. God is angry at the religious observances of people who show up to do some good but are corrupt and unjust in other areas of their lives. God says...

I have had enough of burnt offerings. Your observances have become a burden to me. Your hands are full of blood. So go wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; stop doing evil things,

learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

For Isaiah, the trouble arises because the people had already been disciplined for their wrongdoing. Just prior to our reading today we learn that God had commanded them to change their ways yet they persisted in their sin and they masked it by doing good in certain areas of their lives...like in their religious observance. Or as in Zacchaeus' case, in his giving to the poor some of the time.

Here is the bottom line...for Zacchaeus and for us...there is no religious practice, no worship service, no good deed that can hide our unethical behavior. One doesn't cancel out the other.

In the end, the story of Zacchaeus is our story. He struggles with the line between being a sinner and a saint. Like us, my guess is that Zacchaeus has to keep climbing up that tree again and again and again to learn what he needs to change and to grow.

Parker Palmer sums it up this way..."I know I'm called to share in the risk of incarnation. Amid the world's dangers, I'm asked to embody my values and beliefs, my identity and integrity, to allow good words to take flesh in me. Constrained by fear, I often fall short — yet I still aspire to incarnate words of life, however imperfectly."

The Good News is that you can keep coming back again and again in all of your imperfections. We are indeed both sinner and saint. And, as the saying goes...God ain't done with you yet. Thanks be to God. Amen.