

30 October 2022: Luke 19:1-10 (Proper 26)

Today's Gospel is an example of how dynamic the Bible is. The story is simple, straightforward. Jesus encounters a despicable person and through the encounter the person changes from a greedy, exploiting jerk to a repentant, generous benefactor. Yet there is so much more.

Jesus' meeting Zacchaeus is one of a series of events and parables in Luke's Gospel to make clear that Christ's mercy, love, forgiveness, and restoration is for everyone, all people, no exceptions. In the preceding chapter we see Jesus reaching out 3 times to the oppressed: He tells the Parable of the Widow and Unjust Judge (18:1-8); he blesses powerless children as a metaphor for the Kingdom (15-17); Jesus heals a blind beggar in the roadside dust. This is just a sample of the times Jesus held out the hope of salvation to the helpless, poor, and broken.

However, in Luke there are radically different stories woven into the Gospel's tapestry. Jesus holds out the hope of restoration and redemption not just to the oppressed but also to the oppressors. Jesus reaches out to and restores Zacchaeus, a wealthy, chief tax collector: an oppressor. In the Roman Empire provincial tax collection was a business; tax collectors bid for the right to collect pre-set taxes, with whatever they extorted beyond that going into their own pockets. Usually, the high bidder was a fellow citizen. Tax collectors had well-earned reputations as greedy, unscrupulous, turncoats who used goon-squads to get the job done. Jesus does not condone oppression; rather he invites oppressors into the Kingdom to be changed. For Jesus neither wealth nor destitution immediately qualifies anyone for God's Kingdom: he seeks to heal and restore both oppressed and oppressor.

Jesus offers costly grace for healing. He shifts the crowds' hostility against Zacchaeus onto himself; he speaks to him (causing a scandal) and then invites himself to Zacchaeus' home for dinner (unthinkable)! Jesus takes upon himself the sinner's condemnation because of his compassion. This reminds us of Paul's statement in 2nd Corinthians 5:21: *For our sake God made him sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* Zacchaeus is the recipient of costly grace and unexpected love, as surely as the blind beggar in the roadside dust.

In accepting Jesus' costly and unexpected grace Zacchaeus is reintegrated into the human family—Jesus eats with him, a most basic sign of belonging; Jesus calls him, *son of Abraham*, making explicit his restoration into God's people. Zacchaeus responds with corresponding costly, extravagant grace on a human level: he uses his ill-gotten wealth to restore the lives of those whom he wronged. Zacchaeus responds to restoration in a real, practical way accepting Jesus' encounter with him as the model for his new life. Zacchaeus 'gets it' and is thereby transformed: Jesus changes lives through personal encounter. To truly meet Jesus is to be changed; if we truly receive grace, we are joyously compelled to share it.

Jesus' desire is to heal and restore everyone. The old Zacchaeus was just as tragic a figure as the blind man or the powerless widow seeking justice. His is poverty of spirit, of humanity disabled by greed, extortion, cruelty; a pathetic creature, alienated from human community, estranged from his true humanity and self-isolated from God.

Zacchaeus had believed wealth is the surest road to security and joy—a disease of pandemic proportions today. Such spiritual blindness makes us solitary creatures, even if surrounded by sycophants and hangers-on. We can be free from self-obsession, avarice, and envy, yet only if the love and grace of God take their place, to fill us with holy desire.

Zacchaeus shows us the way: we do not have to keep doing things the old way; we are 'stuck' only so long as we want to be. We can accept the invitation to become more than we thought we could be, more and deeper than anything money can buy. We can let go the props with which we attempt to insulate ourselves from communal responsibility. Our lives need be no longer fearful but thankful, need be no longer centered on material possessions but on God's grace, need be no longer divisive for the sake of gain, but communal for the sake of grace. Zacchaeus' restoration was made complete as he turned from oppressor to restorer. We, too, can admit and make amends for our wrongs against others, against God, and against ourselves as we live God's wisdom and will for ourselves and others.

How might you extravagantly share the costly love so freely given you? We answer in our relationships with everyone we encounter every day.

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive be yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, now and for ever. Amen.