

Sermon Series: More to the Story

Zacchaeus by Jason Byassee

Luke 19:1 – 10

Boone UMC

July 31, 2016

Friends I can't believe the gift it is to be back with you. You should know this is highly unusual in Methodism. Preachers don't go back to their old spot only a year after moving. My thanks to David Hockett, your amazing pastor, for inviting me. I'm amazed at his gifts - when we catch up he's endlessly encouraging and cheerful, so wise theologically, so kind as a person. Technically we're missionaries from this congregation to Canada, back to report; that's why it works. He's my pastor too, and this is such a gift, thank you David.

So, a missionary report on Canada (snore). We love living in Vancouver, as much as we miss it here. Unfortunately everyone else wants to live there too, so its housing prices are the second highest in the world, average home price is \$1.6 million; we'll never own one. It's Canada's most secular place. People moved out there for money, not God, first gold, then timber, and now real estate, so churches struggle. We told our kids they can't ask where someone goes to church as the first question on the playground or ballfield (ask it later, then invite 'em). We love our church there, Tenth Church, pastored by a Japanese Canadian, it's about 40% Asian, a 2,000 member multisite megachurch, Jaylynn's on staff part-time. Our kids chose it, not us. They said this reminds us of Boone Methodist. Thank you for your prayers friends. This move is the hardest thing we've ever done as a family, we miss you every single day, and we feel called by God to be there in your name.

I'm going to read and preach to you from Luke chapter 19, the story of Zacchaeus. Before I do... a warning. Luke depicts Jesus as especially in love with the poor. That's fine, nobody objects to that. Only Luke goes a step farther than the other gospels and has Jesus be harsh on the rich. This is where Jesus moves on from preachin' and into meddlin' (when I say that sort of thing in BC people say how cute my accent is). When Mary sings to God after Gabriel tells her about her coming child, she sings that God has¹ "filled the hungry with good things, *and sent the rich away empty*" (Lk 1:53). Whoah, Mary, couldn't you have just prayed the first half of that prayer? Luke, like Matthew, has the beatitudes: blessed are you poor, blessed are you hungry, blessed are you who weep. But Luke doubles down:² "Woe to you who are rich . . . woe to you who are full . . . woe to you who are laughing now, for you *will* mourn and weep" (Lk. 6:24-25). Really? Jesus? For Luke, Jesus is bringing a great reversal. Everyone we thought close to God, like religious leaders and rich people and rulers, is not...and everyone we thought far from God, like the poor and the sick and widows and children and sinners, is not. *God is close to the lowly and an enemy to the lofty.*

¹ Luke 1:53

² Luke 6:24-25

Look at what happens when Jesus gets around Zacchaeus. He's rich. Not good. He's a tax collector. That's how he got rich. Some translators say that Zacchaeus can't see *not* because he's short, but because the crowd freezes him out. He's short *of stature* with his peers, not in inches. So how will Jesus engage this man who's rich and powerful (boo), shamed in his own community and without friends? Jesus, remember, is on his way to Jerusalem to die. He's been the friend of sinners and soon will die between thieves. Hear what he does with Zacchaeus.

*Luke 19 Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it. 2 A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and rich. 3 He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. 4 So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. 5 When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." 6 So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. 7 All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner." 8 Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." 9 Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. 10 For the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost."*³

This is the word of God, it belongs to you, the people of God, **thanks be to God.**

Zacchaeus was a wee little man, a wee little man was he . . . I love the children's song. It shows that kids identify with Zacchaeus. Adults too. Zacchaeus does something foolish to get Jesus' attention and it works. So whoever you are—a child or an adult, perfectly in command or a little bit foolish, Jesus is someone you can relate to.

Jesus is passing through Jericho. This is still a town in Palestine today. In fact, it's the oldest continually inhabited city in the world.⁴ There's a picture of tourists by a big sycamore—the *very* one Zacchaeus climbed, our guide told us (except sycamores don't live that long, but it's a good photo). Stuff happens in Jericho. Remember when the Israelites marched around Jericho and the walls came a tumblin' down (another children's song)? Remember the Good Samaritan—beaten up and left for dead, and the good religious people avoid him, and the enemy of Israel takes care of him? That's on the way to Jericho. And now Jesus' last stop on his way to Jerusalem where he will die for everybody is in Jericho. The word Jericho means "fragrant" in Arabic. Sounds nice right? But when I was in Jericho last year we couldn't stand the flies, and our guide said anywhere in the region when flies are annoying people call them Jericho flies. They don't include that in the chamber of commerce brochure. Jericho was wealthy. They did a fine trade. So their tax collectors did great, and their chief tax collector, Zacchaeus, did best of all.

Tax collectors come up often in the gospels. They came to hear John the Baptist preach. They were cut to the heart by his preaching. So they asked what they should do.⁵ And John said “collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” That is, go out of business. The tax collector turned over what Rome prescribed and kept the rest for his livelihood and luxury. Imagine the subprime lender or the payday loan people asking what they should do to be saved, and being told not to exploit people economically. Now that would require a real conversion. It’s clear what God thinks of abusing the poor.

Yet Zacchaeus is interested. He’s heard Jesus is friend of sinners, and Zacchaeus could use some friends. Jesus is drawn to shamed people...and Zacchaeus is shamed. His clothes are fine, and his table is full, but no one else sits with him. So he goes to see Jesus. But the crowd blocks him. So he climbs a tree.

Now this is wonderful. When was the last time you climbed a tree (if you’re over age 12)? I can’t remember, if I did now I’d be in the hospital with something torn. Grownups don’t usually climb trees. In art about Zacchaeus, he’s shown to be rather ridiculous. Remember this is a rich man, so imagine a guy in a hand-tailored suit getting out of his Ferrari to climb a magnolia and you’ll have the idea.⁶ Here’s an Eastern Orthodox icon of Zacchaeus, looks silly, right? ⁷Here’s a Chinese image.⁸ And here’s one from Africa. All show that a grown man in a tree *looks kinda dumb*.

I wonder if you’ve felt that way? Kind of foolish for following Jesus? Good. He’s the sort of guy you have to look foolish to follow.

Jesus looks up and *sees* him, and *notices* him...and speaks to him, “Zacchaeus!” (how’d he know his name?). Come down from there. I’m coming over to your house. In fact, what Jesus says is even stronger,⁹ “I *must* stay at your house today.” Jesus has found the most lost man in town. So he *has* to go to him. That’s who Jesus is. This is remarkable, if you think of all the harsh things Jesus has said about rich people in the gospels. The only person anywhere in the Bible who turns and walks away from Jesus is a “*rich* young ruler,” just a few chapters ago. But here in Luke 19 Jesus says he *has* to go to Zacchaeus’ house. Now this is amazing. Jesus is so good he can even save rich people.

Now I know what you may be thinking. Surely we’re not talking about material wealth here are we? I mean Jesus in Matthew says “blessed are the poor *in spirit*,” and surely rich people can be

⁵ Luke 3:13

⁹ Luke 19:5

holy, and poor people mean, right?¹⁰ Just a little while ago Jesus said we have to be “rich toward God,” and lots of the richest-toward-God people I know also happen to be rich otherwise, surely no problem, right? *Maybe*. But this text pushes the other direction. Zacchaeus announces, hey, if I’ve defrauded anybody, I’ll pay back four times as much. I’m giving away half my possessions (he’s not giving away half spiritually, paying back four times spiritually [I want to pay my Visa bill spiritually]). Jesus gushes,¹¹ “Today salvation has come to this house.” There’s no exact rule on wealth and poverty in the Bible. And let’s remember that compared to the rest of the planet, we’re all in here unimaginably rich, even though we don’t think it. The rich young ruler is asked to give it *all* away, like an alcoholic who needs to quit cold turkey. Zacchaeus volunteers to give up half and Jesus loves him for it. Billy Graham said “you tell me what you think about money and I’ll tell you what you think about God.” Our checkbooks show what we worship, our priorities. Another preacher, Jim Forbes says,¹² no one gets into heaven without a letter of recommendation from the poor. Yikes. That doesn’t mean a hard rule: give it all away or half of it or 10% or none of it. It means to be generous. So generous the world thinks you’re ridiculous. Outrageous. Preposterous. Crazy. Jesus thinks it’s salvation. Right here, he says, the kingdom has broken out. And Zacchaeus you’re not frozen out, you’re in the seat of honor.

A friend of mine tells a story about a church in Ontario where an old woman worshiped. She’d heard stories like this her whole life. Announcements about ways to help the poor. And when she heard about one one day, she left and did something strange; something her family found outrageous. She had an empty plot of land by her house. Bulldozers came. Months later a sparkling new house was up. When it was done she took the papers and the keys and went and found a single-parent family, a mom and kids who lived above a laundry mat. She handed them the keys and the papers. “Here, this is what Jesus wants.”...and a poor family was blessed. And a wealthy woman was blessed. And the kingdom inched closer. Jesus said “Salvation has come to this place.” You gotta be careful - if you listen to these stories long enough you’ll do strange stuff.

Another example—Millard Fuller was a wealthy businessman in mid-century America. He was also miserable - a tyrant to everyone who worked for him and to his own spouse. To save their marriage they tried one last vacation together. On the way to Florida they stopped in Atlanta and met with a man named Clarence Jordan, who had a reputation for being holy, good. Jordan told Fuller, frankly, you’re too rich. That’s your problem. Money is making you miserable. Fuller heard the call of Jesus and started giving his money away to those who needed it through a new organization called Habitat for Humanity. The poor would get a home built with their own sweat equity and somebody else’s money, and the rich would get an honourable way to divest themselves of their wealth. Millard Fuller’s marriage was saved. His faith was saved. He never had too little, but he didn’t have too much anymore. And that was good for his soul. Salvation came

¹⁰ Luke 12:21: “This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.”

¹¹ Luke 19:9.

¹² Jim Forbes quote

to lots of houses. What about our houses? Do we want this sort of salvation in our house, at our table?

In our story salvation is imagined as hosting Jesus. Having him over for dinner. He says “Salvation has come to this house,” that is, he’s come over, and not just to Zacchaeus, but to everyone in his home - his spouse, children, parents, slaves, everyone under his roof. Salvation is making an extra place at the table for Jesus. Leads me to wonder. Who have I had over to my house who is a sign of salvation? Recently at our home in Vancouver, we’ve had an Orthodox priest, some students from the seminary, some friends from North Carolina—all very much church people. Most Pharisees honestly, professional pastor types, like us. But what about the people Jesus ate with? Sinners, tax collectors, the sort of people who set good respectable people to grumbling? Conspicuously absent from *my* table. What about yours? One of our patron saints here at Boone Methodist, Tom Cottingham, was always having homeless people over. His kids worried, his neighbours grumbled about property values; he just said this is what Jesus commands, chapter and verse. His extra bed was filled with people who couldn’t repay by having him over. I wonder about us - who do we spend time with that puts us on the outs? Not *our* friends, but God’s weird friends?

The church has to be like Zacchaeus’ house: a place to which salvation has come. A place where anyone can belong - especially those who have nowhere else to belong. Where I worship in Vancouver there’s a man who troubles others. Has mental illness, talks too loud; he says inappropriate things. I was asking the pastor about him. He said yeah, he’s a problem. But you know what? He’s our best volunteer. He’s always at church. He says things that I swear are straight from God, precisely what you need to hear. The church has to have a place for those who are excluded elsewhere. In other words, the church is a place for Jesus and all his weird friends - the rest of us need to adjust!

So there’s a problem at the end of this story. The version I read says this,¹³ “Look, half my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.” On this reading, Zacchaeus *was* a sinner, a chief tax collector, who meets Jesus and is changed, and shows his changed life with costly repentance. That’s a good reading of the story. But there’s another reading. One that is closer to the Greek. It would have Zacchaeus say this to Jesus instead,¹⁴ “Look, *my habit* Lord is to give half my possessions to the poor; and if I ever defraud anyone of anything, I *always* pay back four times as much.” Here it’s not that Zacchaeus is converted. It’s that he announces that he’s more righteous than the supposedly righteous people and Jesus agrees. Remember the crowd snubs him, turns their back on him, and then disses Jesus:¹⁵ “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” In that

¹³ Luke 19:8

world, and in most religions, to be *with* a bad person can make you bad. Evil is contagious. Touch a leper and you get leprosy. Eat with a sinner and you're a sinner. But Jesus reverses that. He touches sick people and they get well. He spends time at table with sinners and they become holy. So here's what this reading would suggest. Sure, Zacchaeus is in a job that makes others look down on him. But he doesn't defraud. If he ever notices he does he pays it back quadruple. He gives up half of what he makes to the poor. Here he's not converted to something he's not. Rather Jesus hears what he does and says wow, *you're* a son of Abraham, no less than any preacher, Pharisee, missionary or saint. Because you have a heart that's generous, like God's heart.

Being faithful to God isn't a matter of going to church, tithing, fasting, doing "religious" things. Being faithful to God is having a generous heart for the poor. It's giving oneself away extravagantly for those who have nothing. Which one is a Jew, Jesus asks, one with perfect Sunday School attendance? Or one who does what God wants in the world? Once you put the question that way, the answer is obvious.

Jesus is always seeking out excluded people and aligning himself with them, taking their side. Soon he'll align himself with sinners, that is all of us, and suffer death *for* us. So then the question is who is excluded among us? We're in campaign silly season in this country. Canada is looking on with horror and superiority from afar. There are lots of people being excluded, aren't there? Blamed, attacked, vilified, belittled. Jesus is with them. So the church needs to align ourselves with "them." In Vancouver there's lots of vilification of rich Asians for driving up property values. It's hard to see a Maserati fly by driven by a teenager (that car cost more than the two houses I've bought). Precisely when we resent someone, Jesus aligns himself with "them," the vilified, belittled in-this-case rich minority.

Do you see how risky the gospel is? That God is on our side...and God is on the side of those we wish God would stay as far away from as possible?

A friend of mine is a Catholic priest here in North Carolina. Whatever else you think about the Catholics, they're not liberal on social stuff. Only celibate male priests, right? No openness on things like homosexuality. So he's getting ready for mass and a transgender couples walk in. His church is clear what it thinks of this. Nevertheless he greets them, hugs them, shows them to a seat of honour. He spread his mantle over them, showed his church he was going to love those whom the world excludes...because Jesus does.

Boone Methodist, what about us? What if the gospel says this—you only love God as much as you love your least favourite neighbour. Yikes. Now, when you feel that yikes, that danger, that sense that the gospel may be too much for you, take heart. Precisely then Jesus says you! Yeah,

you! I want to come to your house. In fact, I'm moving in, making the place my own, I'll be host, you'll be guest and we'll make a life together. You ready for that? To have Jesus run your house, your budget, your heart, your relationships? Yeah? Good. Salvation has come to your house and it's here to stay. And look who else is on the guest list? Someone God is trying to transfigure into a friend.

Last word now from Zacchaeus: *Do something a little ridiculous for Jesus.* Run ahead of others. Climb something you shouldn't. Move to another country or move toward the enemy at work, in your house, in the mirror. And look for Jesus there. Look for him, because he's coming. When you do you'll see that he was looking for you first. He'll call you by name. And you'll do something even more ridiculous than the ridiculous thing you just did looking for him. Hey, I'm giving up half my stuff. Changing my job. Working with the poor. Loving my enemy. Forgiving someone unforgivable. Others will grumble. You can't do that, it's ridiculous. You're ridiculous. But you won't care. You'll just go on trying to *see* Jesus. Because once you've seen him nothing else matters. And I mean nothing. Amen.