

God of Story, let us hear anew, your words of grace,  
that we might live and love your kingdom into being.  
Amen

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

Do you remember this song from Sunday School?  
There is something about this story of Zacchaeus  
that appeals to children. Perhaps it is that he is  
short, or maybe it's the idea of a grown man  
climbing a tree. In either case, there is some kind of  
childlike quality about him that children identify with.

Sometimes it's hard to shake those early  
understandings of scriptural stories... funny little man  
climbs a tree in order to see Jesus.

And because Jesus invites himself to the little man's house, Zaccheus, the rich, tax collector who steals people's money, repents and is saved by Jesus.

The story in a nutshell ... end of sermon!

But Wait! What if this isn't a simple story of wealth, sin, repentance and salvation? What if this story has a different message to offer – one that speaks to us, even today – and isn't actually about money at all?

What if?!

Let's go back to the text and see what happens:

He [Jesus] enters Jericho and is passing through. In that town is a man – and not just any man, but a tax collector – and not just any tax collector, but a CHIEF Tax Collector – he is rich!

And this Chief Tax Collector, whose name is Zacchaeus, hears that Jesus is in town and wants to see him.

In fact, he wants to see him so badly that he is willing to put aside etiquette, hike up his robes and climb a tree so that he can, indeed, see Jesus.

Now, it must be said that Zacchaeus, being a rich, Chief Tax Collector, is not only short in physical stature, he is also short in social stature – at least among those whose money he takes.

Unlike the CRA, tax collectors in biblical time have a certain reputation among the people. Rather than being upstanding citizens, they are known more to be, well, crooks. They look at what a person owes to the government and then add several denarii to the total as a ...tip of sorts...for themselves. Thus, the perception of Zacchaeus, or any tax collector of the time, is that of thieves, crooks, and sinners.

And typical to what we have come to know as Jesus' approach to sinners, when he looks up and sees Zacchaeus, he doesn't reprimand him for his illegal actions, but instead calls him by name and says "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today."

Notice, Jesus doesn't say, I'd like to come to your place, if it's okay with you, if you have the time, if it's not an inconvenience. No, Jesus says "I MUST". It is imperative that Jesus spend time with Zacchaeus, taking in his hospitality.

Zacchaeus, of course, is thrilled but notice the response of the crowd .. "All who see it" we are told "begin to grumble about the fact that Jesus is going to be the guest of a sinner."

Any one of those people gathered would have been proud to have had Jesus as a guest in their home.

Any one of them would have seen themselves as far more worthy of Jesus' time and conversation than Zacchaeus.

What happens next? Zacchaeus stands right there, in front of Jesus, in the midst of the crowd and states "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I pay back four times as much."

Interestingly, in the version we heard this morning, Zacchaeus' speaks in the future tense, "I will give back ..." Which results in the story being about the forgiveness of Zacchaeus, and the temptation of money.

However, when we go back to the original Greek, the tense of this statement is ambiguous at best<sup>i</sup> and from what I can surmise, most learned theologians, both historical and contemporary, read this text in the present tense.

Which, in fact, puts a whole different spin on the story, which we will go back to now.

So there's Zacchaeus and Jesus, standing amongst a crowd of grumbling, frustrated people who see themselves far more worthy of Jesus' company than Zacchaeus, the sinner.

To which Zacchaeus responds:

"I know that's what they all think of me. I know that's the reputation I have, but honestly, Jesus, half of my possessions, I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I pay them back four times as much."

Zacchaeus, it seems, is not what the people think he is. But nobody can apparently see beyond the own biases. Nobody has bothered to take the time to ask, or to hear Zack's story. Everyone assumes that if he's a rich Chief Tax Collector, he must be a crook. They can't see beyond the title of the man's position.

It's an easy mistake to make. We do it all the time. Make assumptions about people. Sometimes it's about race, colour, gender, sexual orientation, and yes, even career choice.

Good or bad, there are stereotypes that are attached to almost every aspect of life. And that includes appearance, past experiences, and social status.

We get a first impression of someone and then make assumptions about who they are and what they're like. And it's hard to see beyond it.

Or maybe we've had an encounter with someone that is displeasing to us ... maybe several encounters. You know, those people who rub you the wrong way; always seem to be angry; or sad; or God forbid, too happy all the time?!

For whatever reason, we write them off as, annoying, worthless, too much trouble, or not worth the bother. We cant shift our mind's eye to see beyond our past experiences.

But I wonder what would happen if we could see beyond our assumptions; if we sat with these people, heard their story, heard what and who has influenced their lives and took time to understand them for who they really are.

Would our perception change? Would we be able to see them in a different light? Would we be saved from our own ignorance, our own small mindedness?

You see, I think today's story is indeed one of salvation, but I don't think it's necessarily a story about the salvation of Zacchaeus and his wayward ways as much as it is about the salvation of the crowd who are forced to see beyond what they think is true;



forced to see Zacchaeus in a different light and to check their own assumptions about who is worthy and who is not.

I suspect that, when Jesus says “today salvation has come to this house because he too is a son of Abraham.” Jesus is speaking about how Zacchaeus has been saved from the ostracizing experience the people have been putting him through.

Today, the crowd has been saved from their own blindness. And because they have heard the truth of Zacchaeus’ story, they can now see beyond their own assumptions. At least that’s what we can hope would happen!

After all, if anyone of the people in the crowd were to be honest with themselves and with those around them, they would have to acknowledge that there are things in their lives they are not proud of;

mistakes they have made, challenges they have faced that have taken them to the brink, actions and words they wish they could take back. Lives they wish they could have lived differently.

It's true for all of us. We are quick to judge others, while hiding our own pain and insecurities. Each of us have burdens we carry, pain we are living with, mistakes we can't make right. But we are doing the best we can with what we have in each moment.

For me, this story of Zacchaeus is one that reminds us, even and perhaps especially in today's world, to be kind to one another, be gentle with one another.

When we come upon those people we struggle with, don't make assumptions, but rather try to see beyond them, reaching out in kindness, holding their lives and their stories gently, and honouring who they are.

For every day, salvation comes to this house and to the world, to these people and to all people, because we are, each and everyone of us, beloved children of God, doing the best we can with what we've got.

May we celebrate this knowledge; live in this knowledge and live BY this knowledge, as we work to bring about God's kingdom on earth.

May it be so. Amen

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/abiding-in-the-reign/twenty-first-sunday-after-pentecost-year-c-planning-notes/twenty-first-sunday-after-pentecost-year-c-preaching-notes>

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