

Luke 19: 1-10 “Always Being Reformed”

Another tax collector story? Yes, we have heard of the tension between the religious leaders and Jesus who befriends tax collectors and sinners, but this scene with Zacchaeus is Jesus’s last encounter with outcasts before he enters Jerusalem, the destination of their journey we’ve been following.

On this day, Jesus is passing through the city of Jericho. Some 30 miles northeast of Jerusalem, Jericho was a major city of commerce and the center of taxation, by the Roman government, that is, and Zacchaeus is the Chief Tax Collector. In other words, Jesus is walking into the heart of systemic corruption of his time and, there, he encounters the man who has been benefiting from the unjust system in a big way.

Luke is telling his Gospel story in “an orderly manner,” so it’s helpful for us to know that, between the last week’s parable about the proud and self-righteous Pharisee and the repentant tax collector and today’s story about Zacchaeus, Luke included another story, a story of Jesus’s encounter with a rich ruler. In that story, a certain rich ruler asked Jesus what he needed to do to inherit eternal life? Jesus replies by reminding him of the last 5 of the Ten Commandments which are about how we are to treat one another. The first half of the Ten Commandments is about being in the right relationship with God, and the second half is about being in right relationship with our family and our neighbors, as reflected in Jesus’s summary of the Law, Love God and then Love Your Neighbors. When the rich ruler says he already keeps all these commandments, Jesus tells him to sell all his possession and give the money to the poor. And the rich ruler was sad because he had a great wealth. And Jesus says “how hard it is for ones with wealth to enter the kingdom of God. It’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” So those who heard him asked “who could be saved then?” and Jesus told them, “What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.” In other words, God saves.

And here comes Zacchaeus, who is rich. By the end of today’s story, he is pledging to give half of what he owns to the poor and return any amount he gained by defrauding by four times the amount, and Jesus declares, “Today, salvation has come to this house,” to the house of Zacchaeus. The Chief Tax Collector, who had been a big-time sinner, is somehow empowered

to part with his wealth and change his ways to right the wrong he had done, and he is reclaimed as a son of Abraham, a member of the household of God.

A camel has gone through the eye of a needle. What is impossible for mortals is possible for God, who sent the Son to “seek out and to save the lost.”

The story of Zacchaeus is a miracle story, and it is a reformation story. How did it happen, and what is the message for us today? Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector and wealthy, materially thriving under a corrupt system, taking advantage of those who were powerless and vulnerable and defrauding his own people, the children of Abraham. He was the lowest of the low. He must have known how hated he was by his own people and his spirit could not have been thriving, and yet, his attachment to his profits, his money, however dirty, kept him prisoner of his own devising, from which he was unable to break free.

But then he heard about this man, Jesus, who ate with tax collectors. To be at the same table and eat together, was a sign of acceptance and equality. And so, Zacchaeus was drawn to Jesus; he so wanted to see Jesus that got above the crowds by climbing on a tree where he heard Jesus would be passing by.

Right then, to his great surprise, Jesus looks up and calls out to him by his name, Zacchaeus, which means “clean” “pure” or “righteous.” Jesus tells him to come down because he must stay at his house today. Luke writes, all who saw it, not just the Pharisees or other religious elites, but all who saw it grumbled and said, “he has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.”

To everyone around him, he was a chief tax collector, a big-time sinner, but to Jesus he was Zacchaeus, the pure, the righteous, and Jesus was coming to his house to be his guest. Being named by Jesus, being reminded of who he was and being accepted by Jesus while he was still a sinner, transformed Zacchaeus to be who God meant for him to be, the righteous.

In this story, Zacchaeus did not make amends for his wrongdoing in order to be accepted by Jesus. Rather, Jesus took the initiative in seeking him out and told him he was coming to his house, and Zacchaeus responded by happily welcoming him in. It was then, when Zacchaeus hurried down the tree to welcome Jesus as his guest, Zacchaeus was able to break free of his old ways of being, of being chained to his ill-gained wealth, which had him thriving materially while his spirit suffered, for he was not being who God meant for him to be.

Saved by grace, the grace of Jesus, the love of God, that is. What is impossible for mortals is possible for God. Saved by grace through faith. Zacchaeus had faith in Jesus, which is to say he trusted Jesus who saw in him a son of Abraham who belonged to the household of God, and it transformed, or reformed his heart and actions to align with God's way.

It is this emphasis on God's initiative first and then our response that marks our Reformed Christian faith. It is not that Luther discovered it, nor that the Reformed Christians are the only ones who believe this way, but when in the history the Church was starting to lose sight of God's initiative and the gift of grace for our salvation, Luther had the courage to sound the alarm.

"Being reformed" happens in these dynamics of "God's call and our response," as we open ourselves to let God's light shine on the part of us that is keeping us from being the person God means for us to be, in relationship God as the children of God.

Until we are touched by grace, we live under the illusion that we have only ourselves to trust and our possession to protect us. Our idol, our false God, what we put our trust in, is unique to each one of us. For the rich ruler, it was attachment to wealth that kept him back from being able to share his possession with those in need. For Zacchaeus, while he was being a typical, abusive, corrupt tax collector, it was his grip on his ill-gained wealth that isolated him from the rest of his people, hurting them and destroying their lives, instead of treating them with fairness, mercy and compassion and allowing their lives to flourish.

A member of God's household cannot rest content with one's own comfort and security while others are suffering. Yet, we are slow to trust God's abundance to provide for all; we hold tight to what we can grasp, what we think is ours, for ourselves.

When Zacchaeus was moved by his encounter with Jesus and changed his past ways to live into a new way, a way that reconnected and reunite him with his community, Jesus says "Today, the salvation has come to this house." The crowd only saw him as a sinner, but the moment of encounter with Jesus was the time of redemption; Jesus reminded him who he was meant to be. Salvation happens real time in our earthly lives. Jesus comes to seek out and to save the lost, and no one is beyond the reach of this salvation by the grace is Jesus Christ, the love of God.

Today's scripture tells us, if a "successful" and rich chief tax collector in the city that was the center of taxation could be saved through encounter with the grace of Jesus, the love of God,

no one is too far gone for God to save; no one is ultimately hopelessly lost, because God's grace never ceases, God never gives up on us. Not even death can separate us from the Love of God.

Today, being a tax collector or working for IRS doesn't make one labeled as a sinner, but where are the Zacchaeuses of today? Or we might ask where does Zacchaeus live in me? What do I hold onto so stubbornly as if my life depended on it, even to the detriment of my own welfare and the welfare of those around me? And do we find ourselves in that crowd that kept Zacchaeus from being able to see Jesus? Are we in the way of others from seeing the grace of God, because we label them "too lost to be saved."

And the church, what in us as the body of Christ need reform? Our vision may be often blurred, but God is always sending God's reforming spirit among us, to revive us, to live more fully into the calling, as individual follower of Christ, as well as the body of Christ.

Whether it is our personal life, or the life of a nation, or the state of the world, what we see is not always hopeful. Sometimes, it seems far too gone. The damage we have done to our relationship with one another, or the damage we have done to other elements of God's creation seem so, well, damaging. We don't seem to find a way out. The Scripture reminds us, what is impossible for mortals is possible with God. May the Spirit of reforming God touch our lives Today, for our salvation and the salvation of the world.