

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost
October 30, 2022

There sure are a lot of tax collectors in the gospels! Just last week, we heard the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee. It was the penitent tax collector, acknowledging his sinfulness, and not the self-righteous Pharisee, whose prayer was heard and who went home right with God. Now, we have the story of the encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus, another tax collector. What is with all these tax collectors?

Well, Luke's gospel in particular has a special emphasis on outsiders, outcasts, marginalized people, people not accepted in polite society. We've seen this cast of characters throughout the gospel. The tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners have found a place with Jesus. The rich haven't done so well, at least not till now.

In Jesus' time and place, you could not get much more "outside" than to be a tax collector. You probably already know that the tax collectors were Jews who collaborated with the Roman occupiers. They oppressed their own people. They often got rich by charging more than was due and pocketing the difference. No wonder they were despised.

Zacchaeus is used to being looked down on. Not only is he a tax collector, he is the chief tax collector. He's in charge of the whole tax apparatus in his community. His main characteristic – he is rich. Period. That's all we're told about him. We infer the rest from our knowledge of his occupation. And he is short (although being of diminished stature may also indicate his social position). Hearing that Jesus is passing by and wanting to see who he is, Zacchaeus climbs a tree to get a clear view. For once, he can look down on the others around him, without being seen. The branches of the tree may provide some shelter, a temporary hiding place from his critics.

Jesus does not look down. He looks up. He sees Zacchaeus and says, "Come on down! I'm having lunch at your place today." Part of Zacchaeus may be thinking, "Ach, busted!" He has certainly made himself vulnerable. Running ahead of the crowd and climbing a tree is child's behaviour, not the behaviour of one who wants to get in his neighbours' good books. But I think the larger part of Zacchaeus is glad to be seen. Jesus tells him to hurry down. I must stay with you today. There is a sense of urgency and mission about this meeting. It's as though Jesus has been sent especially to Zacchaeus – and we will hear later that he has indeed come with a purpose. Zacchaeus obeys, hurries down, and is happy to welcome Jesus into his home, to the disgust of the onlookers. Here goes that Jesus again, consorting with sinners.

It's easy for us to join the crowd that condemns Zacchaeus. He is very far from God's kingdom. He deserves all the judgement that is surely coming his way. Perhaps Luke sets us up deliberately, because the tables are then turned. Zacchaeus stands before Jesus and commits to

sharing his wealth with the poor and with anyone he has defrauded. You can picture the lineup of potential claimants starting to form, hands out.

It's interesting that the Greek text here is ambiguous. Commentators suggest Zacchaeus's words can be translated in two ways. The first, which is reflected in our text today, suggests that Zacchaeus is promising future behaviour – "I will give; I will pay back." In that case, we have a classic story of repentance, restitution, forgiveness, and blessing. However, it is also possible to translate Zacchaeus's words as a description of what he is already doing – "I do give; I do pay back." In that case, Zacchaeus is defending himself against his detractors. Maybe it is possible even for a tax collector to be generous, to be a decent person. As a rich man, Zacchaeus is in a position to do a lot of good. Note that Jesus does not demand Zacchaeus quit his job. He simply says, "Salvation has come to this house."

There's a lot to reflect on in this story.

1. The idea of seeing and being seen. Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus. I'm struck by the wording, "he wanted to see who Jesus was." Jesus's reputation has preceded him, but Zacchaeus doesn't know him. He is curious. He wants to see what all the fuss is about, but the people obstruct him. There is something attractive, something compelling about this Jesus, enough to prompt Zacchaeus to shed his dignity and climb like a boy. He wants to see. How many people just want to see Jesus? How can they do that? Well, hopefully by seeing him in his disciples – in us. Do we make it easy for them? What barriers are in their way? How many have we erected?
2. Jesus looks up and sees Zacchaeus. And he sees Zacchaeus for who he really is, good and bad. In Jesus, we have a God who sees. Most people just want to be seen. Can we put aside our assumptions – especially about those we might call unacceptable – and see as God sees? The bottom line for Jesus – "he too is a son of Abraham." And by extension, a child of God. That's all that matters. Each child of God is worthy of dignity, of being seen. This story subverts our assumptions about the whole business of grace and forgiveness and how we think they ought to work.
3. The idea of being lost and found. What does it mean to be lost? Mary DeGrow and I got lost a couple of times on our recent trip to Italy. The first time, we turned the wrong way and walked in a great big circle back to where we had started. The second time, we were tired and sore, we got misdirected a couple of times by people who didn't understand what we needed, and we just wanted to get back to our hotel – which turned out to be just around a couple of corners, but I doubt we could have found it by ourselves at that point. When you're lost, you have no direction. You're disoriented. You can't see where you are or where you need to go. It can be quite scary.
4. Similarly, what does it feel like to be found? What does it feel like to be seen? For me, it's a big relief. I don't have to pretend any more. I feel safe. I feel known, accepted, and loved.

5. The idea of repentance and forgiveness. Whether Zacchaeus is a sinner who turns to righteousness, or a man who is seen for who he really is, his actions come from seeing and recognizing the presence of God in Jesus. Zacchaeus calls him "Lord," acknowledging his true identity. When we see ourselves as God sees us, we see clearly where we need to change, where we need to make amends. We also see ourselves as God's dearly loved children, and that is what enables us to see others in the same light.

This story comes very close to the end of Jesus's long journey to Jerusalem, where he will meet what is in store for him. There have been encounters with people all along the way – tax collectors, sinners, Pharisees and scribes, sick people, desperate people, suffering and grieving people. Now, we have this one last encounter. Jesus's declaration, "The Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost" summarizes in one sentence his whole mission, one that was announced back in Nazareth: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." That was his whole life's purpose, to seek out, to go looking for the lost and restore them. That must be our purpose too. Bottom line – those who want to see will see. Each child of God is seen. That is grace. That is salvation. That is blessing. Amen.