

Scriptures: Isaiah 1:10-18; Luke 19:1-10

Face-to-Face with Jesus

“Born to reign in us forever, now Thy gracious kingdom bring. By Thine own eternal spirit rule in all our hearts alone; by Thine all sufficient merit, raise us to Thy glorious throne.” We just sang that Advent song, written by Charles Wesley. Charles is probably the greatest writer of hymns in the history of the Church. He wrote over 6,500 hymns. Along with his brother, John, he founded the Methodist movement in the mid-1700’s as a group seeking to reform the Church of England.

Knowing our church history, we know how that turned out. The American Revolution occurred, John recalled all the Methodist pastors in America to England, because he wasn’t too keen on the idea of replacing the rule of a king with the rule of the people. One of the Methodist pastors John Wesley had ordained to come to America, Francis Asbury, decided he was staying on this side of the Atlantic, in opposition to Wesley. To make himself legitimate, he orchestrated a church election, and became the first bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

The relationship between the Wesley brothers and Asbury was never repaired. Sadly, politics have always been in the Church, and has resulted in fragmenting the body of Christ. Winston Churchill, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom during World War II once famously said, “Those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” And so we see it, even today in the current politicking of all the Christian organizations in the United States.

Today we’re going to read an account recorded in Luke’s gospel, about Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was a tax collector. He knew his history, but he repented of it when he came face-to-face with Jesus Christ. If you have your Bible, or a Bible app handy, turn with me to Luke 19:1-10. **Read Luke 19:1-10.**

Jericho’s Tax Collector

The story of Zacchaeus occurs in the town of Jericho. Back in Old Testament times, while the ancient Israelites were en-route to the Promised Land, Jericho was a Canaanite city which was a hostile place. You may have heard that Bible story in Vacation Bible School, or a Sunday School class. The ancient Israelites marched around the city walls blowing their horns, and on the seventh march around it, the walls came tumbling down. The only survivor from the town was a prostitute named Rahab, who had helped the Israelite spies escape, and who would become an ancestor of Jesus Christ.

So in our passage today, Jesus is passing through Jericho, where Zacchaeus happens to live. Luke gives an interesting description of him. He writes, “A man was

there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy,” (verse 2). No other mentions of tax collectors in Holy Scriptures indicates that any of them are “a chief tax collector,” Zacchaeus is the only one. Let’s think about this term “chief,” for a minute. We sometimes use it today in terms like “Chief of Police,” “Chief Justice of the Supreme Court,” or “Commander-in-Chief.”

So what does it mean? It means that the person is large and in charge. A police chief has other officers under him who follow his orders. The Chief Justice leads the conversations and trials in the Supreme Court. The Commander-in-Chief directs the operations of a nation’s armed forces. A chief tax collector, then, would have been the head tax collector for the area – Zacchaeus would have had other tax collectors working under him who followed his directions.

No Taxation Without Representation!

And he’s wealthy! In those days there was a real stigma attached to tax collectors. Taking money from the Jewish people, and handing it over to their Roman occupiers. The Founders of the United States wrote a Declaration of Independence, with a battle-cry of “No taxation without representation!” But those guys didn’t have a thing on God’s people living in the Roman Empire.

The Founders sent envoys to Parliament in an effort to negotiate about taxes. Parliament viewed itself as the representatives of the whole country, including the colonies. The Emperor and Senate in Rome never made any such claim. The Jews were a whipped people, and if they didn’t tow the line, the Romans would massacre them. There are books you can read about how God’s people lived under Roman occupation. The Roman Catholic church has the Books of Maccabees in their Bible, it’s considered Apocrypha in Protestant churches, but there are some pretty good historical narratives which they contain.

And here’s Zacchaeus, making a lot of money by fleecing his own people to benefit Rome. He’s a collaborator with the occupation forces. Talk about being opportunistic! He’s really not a very nice guy! And of course, the people in the town know it – we’ll get to that in a minute.

Zacchaeus was a Wee Little Man

Zacchaeus wanted to see who Jesus was, but Luke records, that “because he was short he could not see over the crowd,” (verse 3). Apparently in addition to his low moral standards, Zacchaeus also had a low physical standard! He’s too short to see Jesus in the crowd of people. So what’s he do? “He ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see Him, since Jesus was coming that way,” (verse 4).

He climbs a tree. This particular type of tree could grow between thirty and forty feet high. They had a short trunk, and large, spreading branches that could hold up an

adult. There's an old VBS song you may have heard, about Zacchaeus being a wee-little man. Apparently he was, but was smart enough to recognize that the tree he was climbing was sturdy enough to hold him up!

"When Jesus reached the spot, He looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today,'" (verse 5). I wonder what Zacchaeus thought when he first heard Jesus call him by name. Zacchaeus had probably heard about the miracles Jesus was doing, he wanted to see Him, and then to be slammed with something of the magnitude of "Get down here, buddy, I'm coming over to your place today." He was probably surprised. It appears Zacchaeus was pleasantly surprised.

"He came down at once and welcomed Him gladly," (verse 6), Luke records. Now, we're back to this focus on other people. "All the people saw this and began to mutter, 'He has gone to be the guest of a sinner,'" (verse 7). In other words, "Oh boy! What is Jesus thinking?! Doesn't He know who Zacchaeus is and what he's done? Why would He go and spend any time with someone like that?"

Jesus Changed Him

Being hypocritical isn't something on which the Sadducees and Pharisees held a monopoly. We see a lot of Christians today who have a tendency to do that – to pass judgment on folks because they think they're more righteous. We see it playing out currently in the Church. I wonder how many people in the crowd that day saw Jesus go off towards Zacchaeus' house and decide that He was no better than Zacchaeus. How many of them wrote Jesus off, because of the company He kept?

"But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, 'Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount,'" (verse 8). Talk about repentance! Zacchaeus is immediately changed. He still looks the same, but just having this briefest instant of personal contact with Jesus Christ has made him into a new man.

Momentarily we'll sing a song, which could have very easily been sang by Zacchaeus on the day he met Jesus. It says in part, "Take my silver and my gold; not a mite would I withhold. Take my intellect and use every power as Thou shalt choose." Later, the song, written by Frances Havergal, says, "Take my will and make it Thine; it shall be no longer mine. Take my heart it is Thine own; it shall be Thy royal throne." Zacchaeus willingly let Jesus be his King, and in doing so, he let Jesus soften his heart. Zacchaeus is done with his swindling ways. He gives half of his finances – his possessions – to the poor. So that fancy, spotless, lifted 2022 Ford extended cab pick-up truck, with the green running lights on the sides – immediately gone. The mansion at the top of the hill in town, up for sale. Zacchaeus realizes he can live in a small two bedroom single story over at the Crossings.

And giving the money to the poor isn't the end of it. Zacchaeus offers to pay back anyone he ever swindled in the past. It isn't just a payback, though. He says he will "pay back four times the amount." Wow! How do you think the crowd reacted to that?

Jesus Came to Seek and Save the Lost

We aren't told. Luke doesn't record it for us. What we are told is what Jesus says next. "Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost,'" (verses 9-10). Zacchaeus the Jew, had lost his way because he was enthralled with things of the world – specifically with riches.

Then Jesus Christ came bursting into his life. See, Jesus recognized that Zacchaeus had been put on the margins by his own people because of the life Zacchaeus was choosing to live. But Jesus decided – because He's God-with-us – that Zacchaeus was precious. Zacchaeus was loved. So Jesus drew Zacchaeus back into relationship with God and with the people of God. He came to seek and save the lost.

There are a lot of marginalized Zacchaeus' of the Church today. They've been pushed to the edges. They don't fit in. They don't belong. And friends, they know it! Some of them have quit coming to church altogether because they are acutely aware that they aren't wanted.

I'll say it again. People know when they aren't wanted. They know they aren't worthy, just like Zacchaeus wasn't worthy. Some of them, depending on the life they are currently living, have probably even heard some of the righteous people muttering about being around them. What they most need isn't to be ostracized and pushed out of the Church, but to be embraced by it, lifted up by it, and told that they are a beloved child of God, and that Jesus came seeking them. He loves them. He loves them enough to save them, and to lovingly guide them home to Himself by changing their relationships with Himself and with others so that they become ever clearer bearers of God's image.

Prayer: Holy God, all our worship is met by the cleansing gaze of Your passion for justice. Enfold us in Your grace that we may embody our devotion in acts of justice and in defense of the helpless, to the glory of Your name. Amen.