

“A Man Called Zack”  
Luke 19:1-10

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We owe gospel writer Luke a great debt. In his Gospel, we find the story that capsulizes for us what the mission of Jesus was all about, and in turn what the mission of the church is all about.

The event happened while Jesus was passing through Jericho, the city of palms. This is what Luke writes in our lesson this morning: (read Lk 19:1-10)

And there was a man named Zacchaeus he was a chief tax collector, and he was rich.” In one sentence we are told the story of a human life.

Here’s the background. Nothing in first century Judea was quite so hated and despised as the Roman tax. It not only reminded the Jews that they were a subjugated people, it also represented a theological affront. To the Jew there was only one King, and that was God. Paying tribute to Caesar, an earthly non-Jewish monarch, was something the Hebrews had opposed throughout their long history.

But there was more. The dirty work of collecting the tax was not done by the Romans, but by collaborating Jews. To make matters worse, some of the money that they collected off the backs of their fellow countrymen stuck to their own fingers.

Scripture tells us that Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector. It’s the only time in the New Testament that that term is used. It meant that he was over an entire district. Zacchaeus may have been short in stature, but he had wealth which translated into power, so, in a manner of speaking, people looked up to him. Zacchaeus was a little man with a big reputation. Not just well to do, according to Luke, he was rich.

Of course, one might take issue with Luke in that descriptive term rich. For in many ways Zacchaeus was as poor as any man in Jericho. For all of his money he was a lonely man, he was an empty man. In the world of the flesh he had everything; in the world of the spirit he had nothing.

The people, of course, looked upon him with complete contempt. He was a dog. He was cut off from communion with the community of God. There is symbolism in his title chief tax collector. It is another way of saying that he was chief among sinners. Therefore, he was prevented from seeing Jesus not only by the press of the crowd, but also due to social and religious ostracism.

It is here that we find our lesson for this morning. This is not just a story of Zacchaeus; it is the story of what it means to be a lost person. **What do we mean when we say that a person is lost?**

Zacchaeus lost his self respect, his dignity, his reverence, his character, his conscience, his conviction, his friends. His story reminds all of us that we can stand in danger of losing everything in life that is rich and real to us.

Man’s biggest problem is that when he has lost his relationship with God, his relationship with all others will go wrong. He can be restored but only through the Gospel of Christ.

For this reason Zacchaeus sought to see Jesus. You can be sure it was not the excitement and thrill of a parade that captured his imagination. In fact, a large

crowd filled with religious and nationalistic fervor was precisely not the place for him to be. He could easily become the focus of a mob scene. Yet, he went.

And here's why. He was drawn by the magnetism of grace. You see, I have this theory. People do not seek acceptance and forgiveness from others if they know from the start that they won't receive it. If a person wants forgiveness, they don't seek out individuals who will lecture them on their poor morality. People don't set themselves up for that kind of a situation.

So Zacchaeus comes to Jesus because he had heard stories of how this teacher had received adulterers, publicans, the crippled, the blind -the outcasts of society -people just like him. **He came because of the drawing power of grace.**

Being of short stature, Zacchaeus could not see through the crowd. So he climbed a tree to get a better view. His inaccessibility to Jesus was more than literal, it was also symbolic.

It's hard to know what drove Zacchaeus to turn on his kinsmen. Desire for power, love of money, revenge upon Jewish leadership, or just plain greed. But we also know what turned him toward Jesus – the possibility of forgiveness and acceptance.

Let me ask you. Has anyone ever misjudged your character? Thought you were, in essence, a bad person when you weren't? It happens all the time, and each time, it's the wrong time.

There are a lot of things I don't condone going on in the church today. Let's be honest. There have been moments in the church's history when she could be more easily identified with the Pharisees of Jesus' day than with Jesus himself. People come to the institutional church and find in us what they hated in the world: competition, jealousy, greed, hatred, and worse of all unwarranted judgment.

The Scribes and the Pharisees criticized Jesus because he was going to be the guest of a sinner. They were so hypocritical and depraved that they neither understood the lost nature of man nor the mission of Jesus. They had forgotten that Moses was a murderer, Jacob a con man, David an adulterer. None of us are above the need for grace. **All of us are in need of God's saving power--** from tax-collectors like Zacchaeus to good pious religious Presbyterians.

Jesus went to be the guest of a sinner, and thank God he did. If he hadn't, we would not know him as savior today. This lesson is all about the saving act of God. Jesus said there's more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than ninety-nine people who think that they don't need to repent. "Zacchaeus, come down, I'm going home with you today."

And now a most remarkable thing happens. Faith was instantly transformed into works. "Half of all that I have I give to the poor," exclaimed Zacchaeus. He didn't give 10%, he gave 50%. Easy to do, we say, because he was wealthy.

No tear jerking, emotional appeal here. No guilt, no hype, no promises of a building named after him. Zacchaeus was a genuinely changed man. The Law said to give 10%, Zacchaeus went beyond that. It's what Jesus called the second mile.

The story of Zacchaeus is all about what it means to be lost - truly lost. Ostracized by the crowds, by the leadership, by your very own people. Wandered so far from God that he turn on everyone around him. He betrayed his very own. And what it means to be found.

Thanks be to God. Jesus came to seek and save those who are lost. Like you. And like me.

