

In Between Righteousness & Mercy

The Story of Zacchaeus

Luke 19:1-10
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Last Sunday we looked at the Parable of the Lost Sheep where Jesus left 99 to search for and find the one that was lost. Today, we have another "lost sheep" so to speak, and his name is Zacchaeus. What many people remember about Zacchaeus comes from the childhood Sunday School song with the lyrics:

*Zacchaeus was a wee little man,
A wee little man was he.
He climbed up in the sycamore tree,
For the Lord he wanted to see.*

What most kids (and most adults, for that matter) remember about Zacchaeus was that he was short. That probably helps endear him to children, since they too can relate to often not being able to see what is going on, like when in a crowd of people. There's no doubt that the way Luke tells this story that he intended Zacchaeus to be an endearing character. The story itself paints an intentionally humorous picture.

This story, however, is far from being a lighthearted and simple. It is packed with both theological and practical revelations about such things as self-esteem, self-consciousness, courage, prejudice toward outsiders, good stewardship, God's grace, salvation, and Jesus' primary mission to seek and save the lost. For you see, Zacchaeus was a rich tax collector, a Jewish man working for the Roman Empire to collect taxes and then skim some off the top. **Tax collectors were thoroughly despised, basically seen as traitors to their own people. Therefore, they were ostracized from the community. They were outcasts.**

Our resource material for Lent this year, A Sanctified Art, makes the following connection.

The crowds grumble at Jesus' self-invitation to stay with Zacchaeus, and **their righteous indignation isn't without cause**. As a tax collector, Zacchaeus has extorted money and acted in collusion with the empire, using his position to oppress his own people.

It is important to call out oppression, and yet, Jesus offers mercy. That mercy then begets more mercy as Zacchaeus, unprompted, offers to return what he took, and then some.

Being righteous involves being a person of virtue, integrity, honesty, and morally right living. It's understandable, then, why the crowd grumbles that Jesus is showing Zacchaeus mercy instead of condemnation. **When it comes to righteousness and**

mercy, our resource asks, “In your own faith life, **do you tend to emphasize one more than the other?**” It continues:

Some faith communities may overemphasize righteousness, steadfastly pursuing what they believe to be pure, holy, and “right” in the eyes of God. Other faith communities may overemphasize mercy, advocating for compassion regardless of one’s actions or inactions. And many communities get stuck in the loop of arguing about who is truly righteous, who should be “called out” or “canceled,” and who deserves mercy.

We see these same divides and arguments bubbling to the surface in the Zacchaeus story. Zacchaeus outwardly carries the labels that would easily make him hated—as far as we know, he has amassed wealth through deceit and extortion, defrauding his neighbors in order to profit off of them.

Can we honor the crowds’ righteous anger? And yet, as he is seeking Jesus, Jesus seeks him. [Likewise, as we seek God, God seeks us.] Jesus asks to dine with him, outraging all who witness his self-invitation. But something changes with this invitation; Zacchaeus welcomes Jesus gladly, announces actions rooted in righteousness, and Jesus pronounces mercy and salvation.

Perhaps we can’t practice righteousness in isolation, as it hinges upon “right relationship.” And perhaps God’s overflowing mercy should always surprise and disorient us a bit. **Can we pursue righteousness and mercy with people we disagree with?** As is evident in the Zacchaeus story, that’s where real transformation occurs.

Christian author **Rachel Held Evans** writes, “**God has a really bad habit of using people we don’t approve of. What makes the gospel offensive is not who it keeps out, but who it lets in.**” We might add: God has a really bad habit of loving people we don’t approve of, or extending grace to people we don’t approve of, or showing mercy to people we don’t approve of. All are true, as is evident in Jesus’s encounter with Zacchaeus. Resource commentator, the Rev. Jeff Chu, writes, “It’s striking that Jesus never called Zacchaeus out—no loud shaming, no public humiliation. Rather, this seems like the gentlest calling-in. Faced with Jesus’ tender warmth, Zacchaeus descends from the tree, rejoins the people, and immediately pledges restitution—a two-pronged act of reconciliation with both God and neighbor.”

Considering Jesus’ gentle approach to Zacchaeus, would we have been so merciful to a person like him? **Do we really want to restore the unrighteous or outcasts into community or keep them at bay?** Is it possible that we are sometimes guilty of secretly hoping that certain folks remain lost and outside the fold?

I’d like to say a brief word at this point about the issue of salvation. The Greek word that is translated as “**salvation**” also carries the meaning, “**to deliver**” or “**to make whole**”. **Here, and elsewhere in the Gospel of Luke, it is evident that to be ‘saved’ is not in reference to an individualistic salvation from eternal hellfire and brimstone. To be ‘saved’, according to this biblical story, involves lives being transformed here and now.**

Part of Zacchaeus’ salvation was that his heart was transformed from being obsessed with greed (as evidenced in his role as a “rich” Jewish tax collector) to a heart

of generous giving. So **not only was his generous giving a form of repentance, it was also a response to his own life being made whole.** And in the process, it also improved the lives of those around him. His generosity provided resources for the poor and needy, and restitution for the cheated.

Perhaps this story reveals that **like Zacchaeus, our all-too-common desire for getting more and more must be transformed – literally ‘turned around’ – to giving more and more.** Zacchaeus' response took the form of action when he promises Jesus, "I will give back..." It is important to note that **he does not make this offer in order to earn or win Jesus' approval, but rather as an expression of his gratitude to Jesus for transforming his life.** He is not trying to win his salvation, which is impossible anyway according to our understanding of God's unmerited grace but is instead responding to the loving and accepting presence of the Savior. By repenting, Zacchaeus has been delivered from broken relationship with his people and **brought back into the wholeness of community. The same restoration can be, and is, true for us.**

This story has a lot to teach us about *our* response to the loving and merciful Presence of God in our lives. That applies to us as individuals and to us together as a community of faith. Yes, **righteous living is a crucial calling to those of us who are followers of the ways and teachings of Jesus. But so is the call to be merciful.** Perhaps, then, we can better understand to what it means to live in between righteousness and mercy.

Amen.

Resources:
Everything [In] Between, A Sanctified Art, 2025.