

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4

Psalm 119:137-144

2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12

Luke 19:1-10

October 30, 2022

For those of you who may not know, my job is an attorney representing tenants in evictions. About a year ago, Connecticut created a Right to Counsel for eviction proceedings for the first time, and it's come not a moment too soon. Between COVID, and the economy, and the general state of the world, we see more people in need of help than ever before.

When I started in legal aid a few years ago, I thought, naively, that my job was to advocate for people who were not able to advocate for themselves. But I spend, cumulatively, a few hours with each client over the course of a few weeks – not nearly enough to know the full story of their lives. So if I try to tell their story for them, I'm not going to be able to do it better than they can for themselves. And I've come to learn that the problem is usually not that they can't advocate for themselves. It's that, when they do, no one is listening.

So what they really need, is someone first to listen to them, and then to convince others in the system to do the same – the judges, the lawyers, the landlords. These people see dozens of these cases in court every day; thousands every year. After a while they all seem to blur together. Someone lost their job, they got sick, they had to pay for a funeral. They fell behind on their bills; then they fell behind on their rent. I know how easy it is to just stop listening after a while, because I have to fight against the same impulse myself. When tenant after tenant comes through my door, I have to stop myself from filling in the gaps with what I assume I already know, and I have to be on alert for what makes each person's story different. Then I tell everyone else in the system – about this person standing in front of you: no, you don't already know everything you need to know. Listen to them. You don't already know how this story goes.

I'm going to guess that most of us here today have known for a long time how the story in today's Gospel reading goes. I learned a song about it in Sunday School as a kid; maybe you did as well. I won't sing the melody for you all, but the lyrics go "Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he. He climbed up in a sycamore tree, for the Lord he wanted to see."

I want to zoom out from this story a little bit first, because I think the context of when it takes place in Luke is important. Jesus is at a point in his ministry where he's traveling from region to region. Everywhere he goes, large crowds are traveling with him. And as he travels, he's healing the sick, blessing the children, and teaching the crowd through parables. The topic of the rich is a key concern of his ministry – for example, in just the preceding three chapters, we read of:

- The parable of the dishonest manager who forgives the loans of his employer's debtors;
- The parable of the rich man, and the beggar at his gates;
- Another rich man to whom Jesus says, "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."
- And the passage we heard just last week, the parable of the pharisee and the tax collector.¹

So even before coming to today, we see a theme: Who is in, and who is out, of the community of God? How is this affected by money? And if you are a person with power and wealth, what is your obligation to others?

To Zacchaeus, these questions must have felt incredibly urgent. He's rich, and he's not just a tax collector, but tax collector *par excellence* –the chief tax collector. With the large crowds following Jesus from town to town, Zacchaeus must have heard all about him already. Some of these stories I've just described must have reached his ears before Jesus makes his way into Jericho.

We know two more things about Zacchaeus. First, his name means "innocent" or "pure,"² remember that, because I'll come back to it in a moment. And second, he is a very short man. We rarely get physical descriptions of people in the Bible, but it's vital to the story here. If he wants to see Jesus, he's never going to catch a glimpse over the tops of everyone else's heads. Maybe this is probably why this is such a popular children's Sunday School story – if there's one thing any kid can relate to, it's being too short to see what is happening in a crowd. Maybe all Zacchaeus needed was for someone to let him sit on their shoulders.

We don't know exactly what Zacchaeus's intentions were. Maybe he was a seeker; maybe he was a follower; maybe he was just curious to experience this legendary preacher for himself. Whatever the reason, he makes the fateful decision to run up ahead and climb up into a tree in order to get a better look.

Jesus, for his part, does something very on-brand, which he knows the crowd of people following him is going to hate. He sees Zacchaeus in that tree and calls out to him: "Come down! I must stay at your house today." And sure enough everyone around him begins to grumble and complain that he's going to be the guest of, quote-unquote, *a sinner*.

Up until now, this story has followed some familiar beats. Someone on the outskirts of society does something unusual to get closer to Jesus. Jesus commends them. The others around him start grumbling. What usually happens next in many Gospel stories, is that Jesus defends the follower against the crowd. For example, he speaks up for Levi the tax collector to say, "I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance." He speaks up for Mary sitting at his

¹ Luke 16-18.

² Note to Luke 19:2 in the HarperCollins Study Bible (1993).

feet to say, “Mary has chosen what is better.” He even speaks up to his disciples when they complain about people bringing children to him – he says, “let the little children come to me.”³ So if I were reading Luke for the very first time, and I got to this story, I’d expect at this point for Jesus to have some blistering rebuke for those grumblers.

But remember what I said earlier, about thinking that we know how the story goes? Because something different, and I think striking, happens here. Instead of Jesus standing up for Zacchaeus, he lets Zacchaeus stand his ground and advocate for himself.

I want to read what Zacchaeus says from a different translation than the one in your service leaflet today. You’ll see why in a moment. Here’s how the Revised Standard Version translates verse 8: “Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold.”

Did anyone hear the difference? The RSV, as well as other translations, chooses to render Zacchaeus’s words in the present tense. He’s not saying “I will give half my possessions to the poor” but “I do give half my possessions to the poor.” At this moment, he’s not repenting from sin; he’s defending himself from false accusations. Remember what Zacchaeus’s name means? It means “innocent.” He is innocent of these accusations. Those grumblers in the crowd thought they already knew Zacchaeus’s story, but in fact they didn’t know his story at all.

Now, I do give a disclaimer here. Since I don’t read the original language, I’m relying on commentators. I find the commentators who say that Zacchaeus is speaking in the present tense of an action he is already doing persuasive.⁴ But there are commentators on the other hand who argue for the traditional view that Zacchaeus is speaking in the future tense of an action he intends to do.⁵ So I’m not telling you that only one of these is the right way to read this story.

But I am saying that we might learn something from considering our position in this story as down in the crowd, looking at someone’s appearance, or their friends, or the way they talk, and thinking that we already know everything we need to know about them, and that we don’t have anything to learn from them. That we don’t need to let them teach us. But according to this story, those people might be exactly who we should be learning from.

Jesus commends Zacchaeus as a son of Abraham, a term which Paul later defines as an heir according to the promise, a child of God.⁶ Jesus welcomes Zacchaeus as a member of the community of God, overriding the objections of that community. To explain why, he says it’s because “the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost.” I think that the point of this story is

³ Luke 5:27-32; Luke 10: 38-42; Luke 18:15-17.

⁴ E.g., Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke* (1985); Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (1997).

⁵ E.g., Robert Stein, *Luke* (1993).

⁶ Galatians 3:26-29

that Zacchaeus was lost, and was looking for Jesus that day, not because of his sin, but because he had been isolated, alienated, cast out by that crowd of people who thought they knew him.

For a number of years, I've followed online a Christian pastor-turned-artist, David Hayward, whose website is called "The NakedPastor." He describes his artwork as "art that starts honest conversations about life, healing and spirituality."⁷ One of my favorite drawings of his is based on the parable of the lost sheep. Let me describe it for you. It's a simple, hand-drawn, mostly black and white sketch. On one side of the picture is a large crowd of sheep standing in a group, and on the other side is Jesus, carrying a single sheep on his shoulders. One of the sheep at the head of the crowd is raising his hoof, pointing at the one on Jesus's shoulders and saying "Whoa whoa whoa! Hold it right there. He wasn't lost. We kicked him out!" The only color in the picture is the wool of that sheep on Jesus's shoulders; that sheep shaded in the colors of the transgender flag. And Jesus responds by saying, "I know. And I found her."⁸

The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost. That's the good news, in a nutshell. It doesn't really matter why we're lost. Some of us might have set off on our own. But others, like Zacchaeus, might have been kicked out, by sheep who really ought to have known better. Regardless, Jesus finds the lost, just because that's what he does, just because they are lost, and he saves us. And our responsibility then, as part of God's community, is to look for those others up in that tree, who we've excluded. To ask them: "What is your story?"

And what then? Well, I think it all depends on what they tell you. So let's listen.

⁷ <https://nakedpastor.com>

⁸ <https://nakedpastor.com/blogs/news/jesus-transgender-sheep-and-pronouns>