

The Lost and the Grumbling
Luke 19.1-10
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Pentecost +24C
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church
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This is one of those extremely familiar stories that possibly requires rethinking, and by that I mean deconstructing and reconstructing the components of the tale if we're going to hear them in a better way. In case you are hearing this story for the first time today, the way we usually talk about Zacchaeus goes like this:

Zacchaeus was a corrupt tax collector, despised by the people around him for being a fraud who made people's lives more difficult. On this particular day, he hears that Jesus is passing by as crowds begin to form along the streets of Jericho. Because he was short, he runs to quickly climb into a tree hoping just to see Jesus pass by. Instead, Zacchaeus catches a glimpse of Jesus who catches a glimpse of him, and everything about Zacchaeus' life changes in a day because Jesus notices him in a high and hidden place and Jesus follows him home for a meal.

It's a great story, and for years we sang about it with our kids, "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." And yet, in the traditional way of telling the story, Zacchaeus really isn't cute. Carol Howard Merritt notes, "We sing about Zacchaeus...in Sunday school, but when we get older, we realize that he was like the broker who added hidden fees to our widowed mother's mortgage so he could vacation in Barbados."¹

So one way to come at this story, the most common way we tell the story, and in fact the way most biblical translations interpret the verbs in this story, is that Zacchaeus was a grossly wealthy man who had amassed tremendous resources while defrauding others and manipulating the lengths of what was legally allowable in his role as a tax collector. Some people would admire this legal abuse of power and hoarding of wealth, even consider his practices to be "smart" because they are legally permissible. However, the folks watching the scene begin to grumble.

The grumblers aren't happy that this corrupt man gets time with Jesus. They want to see Jesus shame him publicly or ignore him because of his shameful misuse of power.

¹ <http://thq.wearesparkhouse.org/featured/lect31cgospel/>

Instead of getting the satisfaction of public judgment, here is another “sinner” with whom Jesus will dine. In this most familiar telling, we listeners are amazed by Jesus’ empathy and compassion for drawing near to one who is lost. And yet, we also get where the grumblers are coming from. We stand there with them, hoping to catch a glimpse of Jesus, doing our best to live out the ways of God, doing our best to honor what is right, and Jesus walks right past us to eat lunch at Zacchaeus’ gilded penthouse.

The ways of God are not predictable, and that much proves true no matter how we explore this tale. What if Jesus is showing us that the ways of God are bigger than our imaginations? What if Jesus is showing the grumblers that God is at work beyond the walls of their religious tradition? What if Jesus is showing us that God is already present and moving in Zacchaeus’ life, whether the grumblers know it or not? What if Jesus is showing us that we aren’t always privy to the mysterious movement and presence of the Divine?

After reading through David Lose’s commentary on this text, I read and reread the Luke 19 passage, paying close attention to the words as they appear on the page. Unlike some of the stories we have read together recently, Jesus and Zacchaeus’ aren’t talking about sin and repentance. There is no profession of faith, and there is no forgiveness of sin. Who brings up that language? “Only the crowd does. When Jesus decides to go to Zacchaeus’ house,” notes Lose, “they grumble, upset by Jesus’ choice of companion (not a new theme in Luke!), and call Zacchaeus a sinner. Which prompts Zacchaeus’ protest.”

In fact, “it’s important to note that Zacchaeus doesn’t actually make a promise [in verses 8 and 9] to give half his possessions to the poor or repay anyone he has defrauded in the future. He says he is already doing that, a claim he probably makes in light of the crowd accusing him of being a sinner. The verb tense in Greek is present, you see, not future. So it’s not ‘I will give’ and ‘I will pay back’ but rather ‘I give half my money to the poor’ and ‘I repay.’ As in now, already, this is my current practice.”

This is when I am most grateful for Greek scholars and friends like Glynn Mathis who are reading along in their Greek New Testaments as we read together. Here I am relying on this verb study from interpreters like Mark Davis² and David Lose³ for our collective deconstruction of the Zacchaeus story.

² <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2013/10/who-then-can-be-saved-this-guy.html>

³ <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/10/pen-24-c-reformation-the-unexpected-god/#comment-186247>

This may seem like a picky, uninteresting detail to you at first, but bear with me because the shift from “I will” to “I already do this” is significant. “Many versions of the Bible translate Zacchaeus’ statement as referring to future action, even though they are clearly present tense verbs in the Greek. To justify that decision, [interpreters] argue that this is an instance of the ‘future-present tense’ in Greek. Curiously, there is no other instance in biblical or classical Greek literature of a ‘future-present tense,’ which means that translators actually made up a grammatical category to justify their poor translations. Why,” asks Lose? “Because we really, really want God to conform to our expectations. Once again, we don’t get the God we expect, but rather the one we need.”

What happens if we let the verbs stay in the present? Let’s consider the story again with that twist and then ask what’s happening.

Zacchaeus was a rich, powerful tax collector, despised by the people around him for participating in a profession marked by corruption. He hears that Jesus is passing by as crowds begin to form along the streets of Jericho. Because he was short, he quickly climbed into a tree hoping just to see Jesus pass by. Instead, Zacchaeus catches a glimpse of Jesus who catches a glimpse of him, Jesus follows him home for a meal, and Zacchaeus was happy to welcome him.

The people watching began to grumble, saying, “Jesus has gone off again to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” Zacchaeus heard what the grumblers were saying and began to defend and explain himself to Jesus as they walked home saying, “No, that’s not how I work. I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have defrauded, I am sure to pay back four times as much.” Jesus listens carefully and then looks at Zacchaeus, pleased with the man’s clarity and integrity and says in affirmation, “Ah, salvation has come to this house. This man is a son of Abraham.”

Multiple students of this text guided me to consider Zacchaeus as already being a person of faith, perhaps even being one baptized by someone like John the Baptist. Ponder with me the scene earlier in Luke, chapter 3. John the Baptizer is proclaiming a baptism of forgiveness of sins and preaching, “Bear fruits worthy of repentance.” In verses 10-13, John and the crowds have a conversation:

And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” **11** In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” **12** Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” **13** He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.”

Luke is a continuous narrative from that point forward, not intended to be chopped up and divided in its reading. In the chapters moving from the chapter 3 scene to today's verses in chapter 19, Luke explores the question of who can be saved, what that salvation looks like, and who gets to decide when and where someone's life is made new. Just a hint: it's not the grumblers who get to decide, and it's not the religious leaders defending the walls of their holy spaces, which means it's really not you and me who determine where God moves and how God moves and what God is stirring up in a life in this world.

So what if? Just what if we have been reading this story all wrong? What if the story is not that Zacchaeus is a corrupt billionaire whose small heart suddenly grew three sizes that day? What if the story is that Zacchaeus is already on the way of God and has come to a better, fuller understanding of who God is and how God dreams for us to live? What if the story is that he came to that understanding, a teaching that transformed his life, without the approval of the insiders? What if, somehow, Zacchaeus was already a follower of the Way, finally meeting the Jesus he had heard so much about, and the grumblers didn't expect someone *like that* to be on the Way. What if Jesus' choice of dining with "that sinner" Zacchaeus was as much for the benefit of the watching grumblers as it was for the man himself?

And what if underneath their grumbling was a disdain for anyone who thought they could be on the Way of God without the "expert" input and supervision of the religious establishment? How dare God work and move without their permission! How dare God expand the boundaries and set another place at the table! How dare Zacchaeus take the invitation to new life seriously! How dare someone actually live into the best and fullest of God's hope for humanity! How dare the tax collector move out of his role as public bully and change the script on his own life! How dare God love and bless where God pleases!

It's an interesting thing to consider, isn't it? Maybe we've gotten this story wrong for all of these years. Maybe the amazing tale invites us into the grumbling to consider our own lostness and foundness. Maybe Luke invites us into constant amazement and surprise as we wake up to the wide and broad avenues of God's love. Maybe it's a promise that our lives really can forever be made new, God's presence truly is available to all, and Jesus' blessing really will follow you home today.

Oh, may it be so. Amen.