

Pressezentrum

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Good Morning!

Hear the text, taken from the Gospel according to Luke, the 19th chapter, verses 1 through 10:

[Jesus] entered Jericho and was passing through it. ²A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. ⁴So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. ⁵When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." ⁶So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. ⁷All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." ⁸Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." ⁹Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Excitement was in the air! Jesus was coming to Jericho! The town must have been in an uproar with the news that Jesus was coming for a visit. You know how quickly news travels in a little town. And even proud Jericho—historic Jericho of Joshua's victory with the help of God, garden city of King Herod—even Jericho was open to this new prophet.

How did the people feel? Were they happy they might hear something new, or see a miracle performed? Were they a little frightened that Jesus might judge them? We don't know exactly—the Gospel is not very specific. But we know that it was a big crowd that came out to see Jesus. It was a big crowd, like the one Jesus had drawn in Samaria and Galilee, and that they lined the streets so thickly that poor, short Zacchaeus had a hard time seeing.

We see this too, maybe even at the Kirchentag: crowds so great that it is hard for any but the tallest people to see well. In the United States, the tradition of public parades has declined, but where I live in Southern California, there is a New Year's Day parade that is still so popular that people go early in the morning to get a good place at the curb. It is worth the wait it to see something wonderful.

But one of the spectators has a problem. He is a small man, too short to see over the others, perhaps not strong enough to push through them to the front. And it is possible that the other people are not helpful to him, either, because they don't like him. He is a tax-collector. His job is to pressure other people to pay taxes to the government. Nobody loves a tax-collector. And especially not in Jesus' time, when tax-collectors went into people's homes and barns and looked to see what they possessed, and made an assessment of what they owed. And simply seized it and took it away with them.

Tax-collectors in Jesus' time were paid a percentage of the taxes they collected. So tax-collectors were thought of as greedy and dishonest, charging more tax than was fair in order to make themselves wealthy. And to work among the Jewish population as a tax-collector for the Roman authorities, or even the hated Herodian monarchs, was a bad thing in the eyes of the citizens. So Zacchaeus had many disadvantages in trying to get to see Jesus. People probably hated him.

Maybe climbing up the sycamore tree along Jesus' route through the town was not only the best way to catch a glimpse of Jesus, but also a fairly safe place for an unpopular man like Zacchaeus to perch, over the heads of his neighbors, and safe from their sharp elbows and clenched fists. Zacchaeus was smart, and even if his place up in the tree wasn't very dignified for a rich man, at least he would get to see Jesus clearly.

But then there is a surprise. As Jesus passes by Zacchaeus in the tree, he calls up to the tax-collector and greets him and tells him to come down from the tree. For, it seems, Zacchaeus is to be Jesus' host on this visit—Jesus is to come to him in his home. The text of the story is not very detailed, but I am imagining that all this came as a surprise to Zacchaeus, maybe even that Jesus somehow knew his name. Maybe Zacchaeus also looked a little comical—a dignified adult man up in a tree.

Whether Zacchaeus was surprised or not, the crowd was astonished. Why Zacchaeus? Why was Jesus speaking to a sinner they wouldn't even respect enough to give him a place at the roadside—and speaking to him like they were old friends come to pay a visit. The crowd was shocked and probably angry—how could Jesus favor someone they rejected? Is that how Jesus repays them for gathering and cheering him?

But Zacchaeus comes down, and Jesus goes to his home to eat and rest. We don't know more than that, because what comes next is not described by Luke's gospel, but we know that Jesus praises Zacchaeus as one who is faithful and deserving and to whom God gives favor and protection and good things. It's a strange story, full of surprises. But what does it mean? Let's have our musicians play while we think about it all.

What does this all mean? Jesus chooses an unlikely person to favor, certainly someone the people don't expect him to choose. He pronounces Zacchaeus to be righteous and deserving of God's favor. Why is such favor shown to the despised tax-collector?

Because Zacchaeus is not what the people think he is. He is hospitable and generous, and inspired by Jesus to declare that he will give half his possessions to the poor. He also declares his honesty—to a society that assumes his dishonesty—and offers to make restitution to anyone he has cheated. His response is open-hearted and generous. It is as though he wants to prove that his heart is pure—which is, in fact, what his name means in Greek.

Zacchaeus even makes a bold offer to pay back anyone he had taxed unfairly four times what they paid. He shows himself to be generous and honest, not the sinner his neighbors assume he is—someone even Jesus can reward with his attention and praise. Perhaps in contrast to the rich young man in Luke, chapter 18, who keeps his wealth and goes away sad.

How did Jesus know Zacchaeus so well? The text keeps its secrets. But perhaps it was precisely the way that the people despised Zacchaeus that Jesus chose him as an example of righteousness. Again and again in the gospels, Jesus exercises a preference for those who need him most—those whom society rejects. Jesus speaks to unclean women, Samaritans, prostitutes and—now—tax-collectors. Just the people that the righteous dislike the most.

And it gets even more pointed: Jesus declares that salvation has come to Zacchaeus and his household because Zacchaeus, too, is a faithful son of Abraham, and Jesus, the Son of Man, came to seek and save the lost. This message is powerful to us even now. It contradicts our expectations, too. We have not fully outgrown the primitive thought that God will love us more if we behave and are obedient, and that those who are not like us, not obedient and controlled and conforming, are somehow farther from God.

Jesus is saying again here that his mission is to the injured and the broken and the unjustly treated, not to the wealthy and comfortable. Zacchaeus was that rarest of people: an honest tax-collector. Like the generous Samaritan in the parable; the honest woman at the well; the lepers and the mentally ill, the handicapped and the outcasts. Jesus works at the margins of life, caring for those whom respectable society rejects.

Jesus says salvation has come to Zacchaeus's house because he was a son of Abraham, but I don't think he's saying that Abraham's descendants are loved more by Jesus, but that Zacchaeus is faithful not only to God but to his ancestors. Zacchaeus is as much a son of Abraham—that is, a child of God—as those who disliked him and thought him disloyal to the people of God.

Early Christians thought the story of Zacchaeus was a story of repentance, as the tax-collector changed his ways and showed new generosity. That seems a reasonable conclusion. But couldn't it also be Jesus taking the opportunity to show the world that those it despises and disregards can have faith and generosity too, and be loved by God? I think that's an important part of this story. But how can we use its wisdom today? Let's think about that while we hear some music.

Why does this story matter to us now? There are a few good reasons, at least. First, when we think about the motto of the Kirchentag ("You see me") we naturally think about how good it is to be seen, in all the meanings that can have. God sees us as God's own creation, God's own children. We see one another as fellow human beings; we even see a glimpse of Jesus in each other. We look at one another with eyes of compassion and love; sometimes with eyes of suspicion and uncertainty—but we are constantly looking around and judging each other by what we see.

Zacchaeus was looking hard for Jesus, and climbed a tree so he wouldn't miss seeing him. Through all the crowds, Jesus sees Zacchaeus up in the tree and calls to him by name—seeing him as who he actually is. Seeing him, and naming him, Jesus makes Zacchaeus his own. Seeing one another was the beginning of Zacchaeus's new life as a follower of Jesus.

Seeing is followed in this story by welcoming: though in a sense Jesus invites himself to Zacchaeus's house, clearly Zacchaeus is a willing and generous host. That's important too—that those who we see—see truly—become connected to us and part of our lives, even if we don't know them well. We want God to see us; to care about us as individuals and to love us—even as Jesus saw Zacchaeus and called to him and visited him in his home.

If we encountered Jesus, would we take him home with us? Of course. We'd be honored and happy as Zacchaeus was, and we would offer all that we had to make Jesus comfortable and to please him. Of course we know that is not likely to happen, at least not the way it does in this lesson from Luke.

But we do meet Jesus in each other. We meet Jesus in those who need our help. We even meet Jesus in those who frighten us or repel us. And we react as human beings react: in anxiety and fear at first, then perhaps in growing trust over time. It helps us when people are recognizably like us; it is harder when they are not. Deep old instincts of racism keep us from feeling the same closeness to people who don't look like us that we do for those who are part of our tribe.

Zacchaeus could be any of us, who need to be touched by Jesus to be more generous, more accepting, more open to difference. In this day of global migration, all of us in all our countries wrestle with growing diversity and pluralism. Deeds of anger and evil done by a few reinforce in us a prejudice toward others—just as such works of violence are intended to do. They are meant to drive a wedge between us. But Jesus binds us back together, and shows us that God loves us all.

God sees us just as Jesus saw Zacchaeus in the tree. We can try as we might to catch a better look at the Divine, but in the end, it is God looking at us through Jesus that makes it possible for us to see God as God wishes to be seen—as a human like us, living, dying just like us—but promising us also an eternal life in him. Jesus sees you, in whatever tree you have climbed.

Prayer and Blessing

Let us pray: Generous, loving God, you give us eyes to see each other, and hearts to understand one another's pain and joy and longing. Help us to see those in need as you see them: your children, our siblings, our responsibility. Help us see the difference between us as an opportunity to learn and grow rather than as a danger to be managed. Be with us; stay with us; watch us as a parent watches their child. For we trust in you, we open our hearts to you, we live in your life now and in eternity. Amen.

And may the blessing of Almighty God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be with you now and always. Amen.

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