

## Ordinary 31C - 2022

We owe Luke a great debt. For in his Gospel alone is told a dramatic story that encapsulates 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. Writes Luke: "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 was 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, not Caesar. Paying tribute to an earthly non-Jewish monarch was something that the Hebrews had opposed throughout their long history.

But there was more. The dirty work of collecting the tax was done not 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. We are told that Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector. That is 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 and wealth means power, so, in a manner of speaking, people looked up to him. Zacchaeus was the little man with the big reputation. He was 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? Well, we have over oversimplified this in America and said that their soul is lost, but it can be much more tragically real than that.

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.

### **Didn't You Hear the Bells?**

One time a blind man was invited to attend the wedding of a friend. The couple had chosen to be married in a village church that was known for its picturesque qualities. As the couple left the chapel, the mother of the groom said to the blind man, "What a pity that you couldn't see the chapel. It really is so lovely. And such a pretty garden." She later repeated this to some mutual friends at the reception. The blind man just shrugged his shoulders each time and changed the subject.

He thought to himself, "didn't she hear the bells?" For him, the bells that had rung before and after the ceremony had been magnificent. He was astonished at their tones and the patterns that they made. For him they had created an atmosphere of joy and sacredness. The blind man finally concluded that the mother of the groom may have seen the lovely chapel but she missed the sound of the bells. With all her senses she had only experienced part of the beauty.

Zacchaeus was blinded by his selfishness, but that did not keep Jesus from seeing him as a whole person. Jesus wanted to stay with Zacchaeus. To miss this part of the story is to remain in the dark. Jesus had to go to his house because this represented what Jesus was all about; giving grace toward those who are lost. In the gospel of Luke, Zacchaeus became the symbolic recipient of the grace of God toward lost humanity.

There is no limit to God's grace. There is even hope for the greedy and powerful. By staying with Zacchaeus, Jesus demonstrated that the grace of God extends to everyone, especially the lost. (by Keith Wagner from *Little Guy, Big Gift*)

### **The Only Thing That Can Be Changed**

A famous preacher once said, "When people tell me that human nature cannot be changed, I am moved to reply that in light of my experience, human nature may well be the only thing that CAN BE CHANGED!" We cannot change the course of the moon or the sun. We cannot change the laws of the physical world. We cannot change the movement and flow of the ocean. We cannot change the stars in the skies and the course they move in.

However, the Bible pulsates with pages of testimonies of the lives, purposes, events, and habits which have been changed and can be changed. (by Eric S. Ritz from *Why Change Is Possible*)