

## Vindicating Zacchaeus

Psalm 119:137-144

*I am small and despised, yet I do not forget your precepts.*

Luke 19:1-10

*Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much."*

For many years I thought I understood exactly what the story of Zacchaeus was about—a sinner who repents in Jesus' presence and receives salvation. The conversion of a self-centered man to a life of generosity and justice. That's the way it was told to me as a child. We even had a little song about it: "Zacchaeus was a wee little man, a wee little man was he...."

Jesus is coming through town. A large crowd gathers. Because he is short, Zacchaeus shimmies up a tree so he can see over people's heads. He is a "chief tax collector" who probably worked his way up in the Roman tax system and had become prosperous. Zacchaeus is hated by his fellow Jews for having profited through his collaboration with an unjust system. We can feel disdain toward Zacchaeus rising in our own hearts. We may have in our heads a picture of this sniveling little guy, rightly despised by everyone. He is compromising, rich, and...he's short! If I were going to make a movie about Zacchaeus, I'd want Danny Devito in the lead role!

So we are set up for a "conversion story." We've got Jesus coming down the road. We've got a repulsive little character that has gotten rich off the "system." Jesus sees Zacchaeus up in the tree and calls him down, saying that he "must" stay at his house that day. Whenever Jesus says "must," it has to do with the deepest reason for his own life, his call from God. That's as good a definition of "call" as you can get—something that down deep you just feel you MUST do. Jesus' sense of God's call leads him to know what he "must" do in each situation, where he "must" go, whose life he "must" respond to. Right now, it's this odd little guy up in a tree.

Zacchaeus scrambles down the tree. The crowd grumbles when Jesus invites himself home with the most despicable fellow in town. It grates our moral nerves that Jesus wants to be with someone we can't stand! Imagine the person who represents everything opposite of what the Gospel means to you, someone you size up as unjust or whose wealth or social position seems to you abhorrent. Then imagine going to their home as a guest. It just gives the wrong signal, that you approve of who they are and what they do.

Jesus actually never gets to Zacchaeus' house. Luke says that Zacchaeus' "stood there." I think Luke means this in a profound way: In the face of the prejudice and hate swirling around him, confronted by this rabbi he doesn't even know, Zacchaeus plants his feet. He does not crumble under the glares of others. He does not shrink away from a spiritual teacher who could either show him God's mercy or lower the divine boom on him. I think Zacchaeus had had enough, was tired of running and hiding and feeling miserable. He was going to take his chances with the crowd and with Jesus. That, I think, is what it means that Zacchaeus "stood there." And this is where I began to learn that the story of Zacchaeus means something quite different from what I had been taught.

Zacchaeus says to Jesus: "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I pay back four times as much." Now, the NRSV and other versions have Zacchaeus saying that he "will" give half to the poor and "will" repay those he defrauds. Yet the Greek verbs are present tense, not future. Zacchaeus is not telling Jesus what he WILL DO from now on; he is explaining to Jesus how he has been and is now living his life. Zacchaeus is standing up for himself against accusations of having no regard for God's laws. He is throwing himself on the mercy of this unknown spiritual teacher.

The more I have worked with this story through the years, the clearer this meaning has come to me. It flies in the face of scores of preachers, Sunday School teachers, and many scholars. However, the New Testament scholar Joseph Fitzmyer writes that the story is about "the vindication of a rich person who was concerned for the

poor and even for his own customary conduct...Zacchaeus is not self-effacing, but he is not boasting either [THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LUKE X-XXIV, The Anchor Bible].” What we have in Zacchaeus is a wealthy person of faith who goes far beyond any religious law in his generosity toward the needs of others, and is vigilant over his dealings with others. Furthermore, nobody even knows about it. It would appear that Zacchaeus just does it because it’s the right thing, not to get attention. The rule these days is that as wealth goes up, generosity and concern for the poor go down. Zacchaeus demonstrates the opposite—as wealth goes up, so does giving to others. The rule these days is to just avoid getting caught in unjust or unfair dealings. Zacchaeus shows the opposite path—justice and fairness are at the core of a meaningful life.

Now Jesus says that salvation has come to Zacchaeus’ house and that he also is a child of Abraham. He is not pronouncing God’s forgiveness on a confessing sinner. There is no confession of sin in the story, nothing that makes it a conversion story. He is vindicating Zacchaeus as an exemplary person, particularly a person of wealth, who faithfully lives his life according to what God requires of us and even goes beyond what is required. There is no biblical law requiring that we give half of our own resources to others. Though the text says that Jesus spoke to Zacchaeus, his words are actually addressed to the crowd. He refers to Zacchaeus in the third person. While he is letting Zacchaeus know that he belongs to God as much as anyone else, he is calling the people to account for their prejudice toward and ignorance of this man.

A few moments ago, we read these words from Psalm 119: “You are righteous, O Lord, and your judgments are right...My zeal consumes me because my foes forget your words...I am small and despised, yet I do not forget your precepts.” It appears that these words are embodied in Zacchaeus.

What might we glean from this reading of the story?

There is the condemnation of Zacchaeus by others. How often and subtly we make such judgments! Just when we think we have risen above it and feel ourselves glowing with unconditional love, animosity toward this or that person, for this or that reason, flares up in us. We may, for instance, have great sympathy for and solidarity with those whose suffering is obvious—the poor, those with disabilities, the sick or dying, the unjustly treated. Yet there are “blind spots” of prejudice toward those we have judged unjust or wealthy or powerful. This story reminds us that we do not really know anyone! We think we do. We have little boxes in our minds into which fit others. It makes it easy for us to deal with them, and enables us to feel pretty righteous. This person deserves our sympathy and compassion. This person deserves our scorn. The story of Zacchaeus’ condemnation by his own community of faith is only one of many teachings in scripture that cause us to look deeply into our own hearts and minds, becoming aware of the ways we still tend to let our prejudices take charge.

Then there is Zacchaeus himself. He is aware of his relationship with God and lives as faithfully as he can out of that relationship. The judgments of others must have hurt. Like the tax collector in an earlier story in Luke’s gospel [18:9-14], who prayed an agonized prayer for God’s mercy, Zacchaeus is likely very aware of his imperfections. I doubt that he was proud of the job he held, working for the occupying government. And yet, he did not forget that he belonged to God first of all, and that his life was for the purpose of expressing God’s life-giving laws. Thus, Zacchaeus stands as an exemplary person of wealth, who first and foremost is committed to being exceedingly generous for the sake of others and to being fair and just in all his dealings.

Last...though this does not at all exhaust the story...there is this business of salvation. “Today salvation has come to this house,” says Jesus. Salvation is a very important word. It has been hijacked by certain sectors of Christianity to mean “getting saved so we can go to heaven.” The idea is that we must have this “faith experience” of accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior because that is the only way we are going to get to heaven, the afterlife. That view does not get much support in scripture itself, least of all in the stories and teachings of Jesus. Salvation means many things with regard to our relationship with God. It means healing and wholeness, in body, mind, relationships, and societies. It means rescuing, being “saved from” dangerous and potentially fatal situations, physically or spiritually. But it also means

being vindicated, especially prevalent in the psalms [17:2, 26:1 as examples]. In Psalm 26, for example, we read: “Vindicate me, O Lord, for I have walked in my integrity, and I have trusted in the Lord without wavering.” The

psalmist prays urgently to God because he feels wrongly judged by others when he has been as faithful as he can be. These words could have come from Zacchaeus' own heart.

Who has not experienced feeling judged by someone who doesn't understand or want to really understand us? How many of us constantly question ourselves, wondering if all this effort to be faithful in our relationship with God and the struggle to follow Christ is worth it, is having any effect at all? And what about our self-condemnation, which is so effective that we don't even need others to judge us? We're doing a great job of it ourselves! Well, in those cases, salvation as vindication is something we need to know about! We can stand our ground, with others and ourselves, knowing and affirming ourselves to be doing the best we can do. This is an aspect of our spirituality that, I think, we need to know more about and to practice. It has nothing to do with pride or arrogance, but with affirming our relationship with God and relinquishing the perfectionism that we so often lay on ourselves and others.

When Jesus says that he came to seek and to save the lost, in this case he meant vindicating Zacchaeus in the face of hostility and condemnation. To those who had written him off and saw him as no longer "one of them," that is, God's people, Jesus' presence with and words to Zacchaeus are a resounding confirmation of him as a child of Abraham. Remember that Jesus speaks not only to Zacchaeus, but also to the crowd on his behalf. In essence he is saying, today this man is vindicated as one of God's people, just like you. The reason I came is to seek out everyone who, for whatever reason, feels separated from God, whether because of their own or others' sin .

Now do you think you might like to go to Zacchaeus' house for coffee or tea, to have a chat? I would. I would like to get to know better this person who somehow found a way to live from his heart as one who loved God and felt the claim of others on his life. Even when no one around him cared to know who he really was. Even in world foggy with compromise and injustice.