

November 3, 2013 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

## Vindicating Zacchaeus, and Other Good People Wrongly Judged

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

*I will stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the rampart;*

*I will keep watch to see what God will say to me, and what God will answer concerning my complaint.*

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 pay back four times as much."*

For most of my life I thought I knew what the story of Zacchaeus was about: a sinner who repents and receives salvation. A wealthy, self-centered little man converted to a life of generosity and justice. That's the way it was told to me as a child, but then I began to look more closely at what was actually IN the text instead of what I was told was there.

Jesus is coming through town. A crowd gathers. Being short, Zacchaeus shimmies up a tree so he can see over people's heads. He is a "chief tax collector" who became prosperous working for the Roman tax system. He is hated by his fellow Jews for collaborating with an oppressive regime. We may have in our heads a picture of this sniveling, disdainful little guy. He is compromising, rich, and...he's short! A movie about Zacchaeus would have to cast Danny Devito in the lead!

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 his sensitivity to God's call and leading in his life. That is not a bad definition of "call"—something that, down deep, you feel you MUST do. Jesus pays attention to what he must do in each situation, where he must go, to whom he must respond. Right now, it's this little guy up in a tree.

Zacchaeus scrambles down. The crowd grumbles about Jesus going home with the most despicable fellow in town. Perhaps it grates our moral nerves that Jesus might want to be with someone we can't stand, who represents the opposite of what we value, someone we have decided is unjust, whose wealth or social position or politics is abhorrent to us. It just sends the wrong signal. What is Jesus up to?

In the story, they never actually get to Zacchaeus' house. While the crowd is grumbling, Luke says that Zacchaeus' "stood there." I think Luke is very deliberate at this point. In the face of the prejudice and hate swirling around him, in the company of this rabbi he doesn't even know, yet from whom he has felt some kindness, Zacchaeus plants his feet. I think Zacchaeus had had enough, was tired of hiding and feeling miserable. That, I think, is what it means that Zacchaeus "stood there." 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 version has Zacchaeus saying that he "will" give half to the poor and "will" repay those he defrauds. Yet the Greek verbs are in present tense, not future, and they describe customary behavior. 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 when, in fact, he fulfills and goes beyond the law.

The more I have contemplated and studied this story, the clearer this meaning has come to me. 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...[THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LUKE X-XXIV, The Anchor Bible]." What we have in Zacchaeus is a wealthy person of faith who goes beyond religious law in his generosity toward the needs of others, and is vigilant in his dealings. Furthermore, nobody even knows about it. Zacchaeus does it because it is the right way to live, not in order 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 must giving to others. The rule these days is to exploit those who work for you to show a greater profit and increase your own wealth. Zacchaeus demonstrates the opposite—justice and fairness are at the core of a meaningful, as well as a truly prosperous life. The rule these days is that if you are wealthy, you give a safe portion of your wealth to charity without hurting yourself, and receive recognition for it. Zacchaeus has been living his life in a thoroughly just and generous way without others noticing and without calling attention to it. It is what is expected, not something special.

Today we read these words from Psalm 119: “I am small and despised, yet I do not forget your precepts.” These words are embodied in Zacchaeus.

Jesus says to the crowd that salvation has come to Zacchaeus’ house, and that he, like them, is a child of Abraham. He is not pronouncing forgiveness on a confessing sinner. There is no confession of sin in the story. He is vindicating Zacchaeus as an exemplary person of wealth, who faithfully lives his life according to what God requires of us. Jesus’ words are addressed to the crowd. While he is letting Zacchaeus know that he belongs to God as much as anyone else, Jesus is also calling the people to account for their actions. The story ends up being as much about our prejudices and the judgments we make as it is about Zacchaeus.

What are some things we can glean from this reading of the story?

There is the condemnation of Zacchaeus by others. How often we engage in such judgments! Just when we think we have risen above it and feel ourselves glowing with unconditional love, animosity toward this or that person, or some insecurity, flares up in us, and we are scrutinizing others with a judging eye. This story reminds us that we do not really know anyone! We think we do. We have little boxes in our minds into which we fit others. It makes it easy for us to deal with them, and enables us to feel good about ourselves, for a time anyway. 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, and become more aware of our habits of judging and measuring others.

Spiritual growth happens as we turn our attention from judging and measuring others, to focusing on our own lives. How we are living. The things we are doing or not doing. We waste away our lives in preoccupation with others’ lives, not living our own lives with attention and awareness. There is a simple Buddhist teaching that is completely consistent with our own scriptures and with this story: “Do not give your attention to what others do or fail to do; give it to what you do or fail to do.” (The Dhammapada) Jesus put it this way: “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged.” (Matt. 7:1) When we find ourselves preoccupied with how we think others are living, drifting into judging or criticizing them, it is a good indicator that we are probably avoiding work we need to do with our own lives.

Then there is Zacchaeus himself. He is aware of his relationship with God and lives as faithfully as he can out of that relationship, within the circumstances of his life. 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 failings. 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. Zacchaeus stands as an exemplary person of wealth, who, first and foremost, is committed to being generous for the sake of others, and to being fair and just in all his dealings. He is a model for those in our society today who are in the position of having or making great wealth, and who must choose whether to do so at the expense of others or for the benefit of others. Here I think of the fair wage and benefit practices of the CEO of the Costco Corporation versus the exploitative practices of companies like Wal-Mart and McDonalds. We have far too few like Zacchaeus, and must lift him up as a model so that there might be many more.

Finally, 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 some to mean "getting saved and going to heaven." That view does not get much support in scripture itself, least of all in the stories and teachings of Jesus. Salvation means healing and wholeness, in body, mind, relationships, and societies. It also means being vindicated. 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 feels wrongly judged by others when he has been as faithful as he can be. These words could have come from Zacchaeus' own heart.

When Jesus says that he came to seek and to save the lost, in this case he meant vindicating Zacchaeus in the face of condemnation by others. To those who had cut Zacchaeus off as no longer "one of them," Jesus' presence with and words to Zacchaeus were a clear confirmation of him as a child of Abraham. Jesus was saying, "Today you must see this man as one of God's people, just like yourselves. I came to seek out everyone who feels separated from God for whatever reason."

Zacchaeus seems to be a person who found a way to live from his faith, 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 a world filled with compromise, greed, and injustice. There are plenty of teachings in our scriptures that warn of the dangers of wealth and are critical of those who are wealthy but do not live with compassion and justice. This story is not one of them. It stands as a caution against casting people into categories and condemning them. It teaches us that when our minds turn toward judgment and condemnation, we must remember that we do not know the realities of this other person's life, and that our primary work is our own life and what we make of it. The story also teaches us to be as faithful as we can be wherever we are, and live, and work. And it reminds us to be watchful whenever when we begin to think that another person is not a child of God, just as we ourselves are.