

**October Sermon Series: Learn from the Master Week 4 October 30, 2016**

Then Jesus entered and walked through Jericho. There was a man there, his name Zacchaeus, the head tax man and quite rich. He wanted desperately to see Jesus, but the crowd was in his way - he was a short man and couldn't see over the crowd. So he ran on ahead and climbed up in a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus when He came by. When Jesus got to the tree, He looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, hurry down. Today is My day to be a guest in your home." Zacchaeus scrambled out of the tree, hardly believing his good luck, delighted to take Jesus home with him. Everyone who saw the incident was indignant and grumped, "What business does Jesus have getting cozy with this crook?" Zacchaeus just stood there, a little stunned. He stammered apologetically, "Master, I give away half my income to the poor - and if I'm caught cheating, I pay four times the damages." Jesus said, "Today is salvation day in this home! Here he is: Zacchaeus, son of Abraham! For the Son of Man came to find and restore the lost." Luke 19: 1-10 *The Message*

Our daughter was here yesterday, and I told her that I'd be preaching on Zacchaeus today, and she began to sing, "Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he. He climbed up in a sycamore tree for the Lord he wanted to see." And I wondered how this powerful story of a sinner, so committed to seeing Jesus that he climbed a tree, and who had a real "Come to Jesus" moment with the Master Himself; a sinner who recognized that he was forgiven and accepted and was born again (from a life of swindling and profiteering to a life of generosity and restitution)... I wondered why this story was reduced to a children's song, and why Zacchaeus isn't one of our saints instead of an almost comicbook character of a short, little man who climbed up a tree to see Jesus.

Most of the images on Google of Zacchaeus are of a short, childlike character trying to see over the crowd, and running to a tree as fast as his little legs can carry him, hoping to be noticed by Jesus. There's no mention in the gospels of Zacchaeus being childlike or comic, and perhaps him being "short" was more a comment about the moral stature of the man, and less about his height. Perhaps the crowd was not any taller than

Zacchaeus, but like the Pharisee in last week's gospel lesson, they saw him as smaller than themselves. This story has touched my heart, and I want to know the real Zacchaeus; I want to know how meeting Jesus transformed him.

Last week's gospel lesson was a story Jesus told about a Pharisee and a tax collector who went to the temple to pray. The Pharisee looked down on the tax collector, a known sinner, although Jesus said it was the sinner who recognized his need for God's mercy, and not the Pharisee. Tax collectors were despised by their fellow Jews for colluding with the Romans, for overcharging and extorting money, and for pocketing for themselves what wasn't owed in Roman taxes. So there's nothing childlike or comical about this tax collector Zacchaeus, who was recognized and named by those in the crowd as "a real sinner." Jericho was a big city, and Herod had an impressive palace there, and that would have made Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector, a very rich man.

In Jesus' presence Zacchaeus apparently also recognized himself as a real sinner in need of redemption, and he had a change of heart (sometimes called being born again... but that expression carries too much baggage... so let's say that Zacchaeus experienced a transformed heart... or in Wesleyan words, that his heart was "strangely warmed.") In response to Jesus telling Zacchaeus that he was going to Zacchaeus' house as his guest, Zacchaeus told Jesus about the change in his heart. "Look, Lord," he said, "I will give half of my property to the poor. And if I have swindled anybody out of anything I will pay him back four times as much." Jesus' response to Zacchaeus was as much for Zacchaeus, as it was for the crowd around them, as it is for

us today. Jesus said, "Salvation has come to this house today! For the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost."

If you ever question your goodness or worthiness; or if you worry that your sins are too many or too grievous; or if you think doubt and unbelief might disqualify you from a place in God's heart... then this is a good tattoo to have, where you can read it every day. "Jesus came to seek and save the lost." This is the good news (which is what the word "gospel" means.)

In the story of Zacchaeus the whole gospel is revealed. First there's a known sinner, inexplicably drawn to the One whom people claimed touched and healed the rejected, the despised, the sick, the disturbed, the lost, and named them as God's own. Second: Jesus recognized and responded to the lost seeker looking for Him. Third: Jesus confirmed His purpose (to seek and save the lost) by inviting Himself to be a guest in the home of a known sinner. Fourth: Jesus gave the redeemed man a purpose: (to pay back God's mercy... and then to pay it forward by living a transformed life.) And fifth: Zacchaeus' actions witnessed to a transformed life (paying back anyone he'd swindled four times the amount, and giving half of what he owned to the poor.)

After meeting Jesus, Zacchaeus was probably not still a very rich man, but he was a new man. And years later in a letter to the early churches, the Apostle Paul (who might have been thinking about Zacchaeus) wrote, "If anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old has gone, the new is here!" When we come to know Jesus, like Zacchaeus did, we don't know what he'll expect us to give, or to give up... but we can be - like Zacchaeus was - part of the new creation... part of God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

## MOVE

Jesus went home with Zacchaeus, without finding out if Zacchaeus had cleaned up his act, or had food for a guest, or had made the bed in the spare room after his daughter had spent the night and left the room an absolute mess. Jesus coming to us, and making His home in us, is the gracious activity of God and not because of our own efforts or our goodness. Jesus came to seek us and to save us, to give our lives meaning, and to transform the world - through us - with God's love. So although grace and salvation are the work of God, we can do our work, making a place in our lives to welcome Jesus. We can make a place - here in our midst, and even in the darkest places in the world - to welcome Jesus.

Zacchaeus had a "Come to Jesus" moment with the Master. He saw Jesus and more importantly, Jesus saw him. Jesus saw all the things Zacchaeus had done and used to fill the emptiness inside ~ that space in each one of us that only God can fill ~ and He named Zacchaeus a son of Abraham, a child of God, an inheritor of God's promises. And in that Jesus-moment Zacchaeus saw that real wealth, and true value, is in being known and loved by God, and being claimed as God's own.

When we hear a story from the bible - like this encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus - and we just listen to it but we don't take it to heart (that is, we don't wrestle with it, ask it for a blessing, learn from it, act on it) then it's reduced to words on a page instead of the Living Word of God. Scripture is meant to transform us. We are meant to find ourselves in the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus; to look at where we ourselves are lost; to see if we're part of the crowd preventing Zacchaeus from seeing Jesus; or how we can make welcoming places for lost people to experience Jesus. Zacchaeus was a

tax collector... he collected money that was owed the Roman government, he collected money to line his pockets; he collected more than was his share. But what he really wanted was to see Jesus, and to be called and known as “Son of Abraham. Child of God.”

The ushers have baskets with gold coins and they're going to hand them out. There's a gold coin for everyone. This is a special coin that has chocolate inside the gold foil. You might want to save it to remember Zacchaeus, to remember that Jesus came to seek and save the lost. You might want to unwrap and eat it to remind you how sweet it is to be known and loved by God.

I believe it's God's dream for all the world that everyone lost is found; that everyone knows how sweet it is to be loved by God. I think it's God dream that everyone has a tree to climb to see Jesus, or a reasonably comfortable wooden bench to sit on in the midst of a loving congregation, or a hot meal and a safe Fellowship Hall floor to sleep on, or groceries to fill an empty fridge, or a phone call on a lonely day, or whatever the needs are that remind the human spirit that we are not alone, that God is with us, that we matter beyond all belief to God... and that Jesus sees us and knows us and names us all (even the sinner, even the tax collector, even you, even me, even those who look like they're hopeless lost) Jesus names us all: “Child of God.”

Today is the beginning of our finance campaign, and every Sunday for a month you'll hear about the ways God is using us, and our coins, to realize God's dreams. Our money pays for this welcoming place, and to maintain and upgrade the buildings; to buy bibles and books for studies; to provide ministries to children and youth; for music for the Choir; to pay staff salaries; to feed and help people in Contra Costa County; and

through the global United Methodist Church, our money reaches into places we'll never go to care for God's people... and to be a witness to people everywhere that God is still active in the world, creating, redeeming, sustaining, and loving us... and that Jesus still seeks and saves the lost.

## MOVE

This month I've preached on learning from the Master, Jesus. We've had a "verse for the soul" from Matthew 11:28-30. We learn and recite and pray with scripture because it causes us to see God, and ourselves differently; because when we take a scripture "to heart" it changes us. Let's say this scripture one last time ~ because next month we'll have a different scripture to "take to heart." The October verse for the soul is on page three. Let's say it together, starting with the words, "Jesus said." "Jesus said: Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to Me. Get away with Me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with Me and work with Me - watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with Me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

Lord Jesus, thank You that You sought and found Zacchaeus. Thank You that You still seek and save the lost... You still seek to heal and redeem us, to use us to accomplish God's dreams. Thank You that Your love is stronger than sin, and doubt, and fear. Like Zacchaeus may we realize that real riches and true value come from being known and loved by You, and by being named "Child of God." So use us, use our riches, Lord, to bring hope and healing to those in our neighborhoods, and to the all the world. May You find Your home in us, we pray, Lord. In Your name. Amen.