

Zacchaeus

Last week we explored the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man had ignored the plight of Lazarus, lying destitute with oozing sores right outside the rich man's gate. In the parable, that did not end well for the rich man. Jesus used the parable as a warning to those who could care for the poor but don't bother.

Zacchaeus appears to be a rich man who goes the other way. Zacchaeus was a Jewish man who worked for the Roman government as a tax collector.

Although I'm someone who mostly appreciates the good that my taxes do, I know not everyone agrees. We can still get pretty steamed up about taxes.

The situation in first century Palestine was far worse. Tax collectors were viewed as at best sell-outs. They sold out to the occupying Roman nation by cooperating with them to collect taxes.

Taxes were crippling for the average peasant, and they generally did more for the wealthy Roman governors and rich people than the peasants. It was lucrative work for the tax collectors.

Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector which means that he was basically a regional IRS agent who oversaw a team of tax collectors. He would get paid by all of the tax collectors who worked under him.

Tax collectors were also often corrupt, skimming a little extra off the top for themselves. The phrase "tax collectors and sinners" rings throughout Luke's gospel. Tax collectors are so despised they're apparently put in their own special category apart from the ordinary sinners.

The wording, especially in the Greek, doesn't make it completely clear that Zacchaeus was corrupt, but the fact remains he grew very wealthy at the expense of his neighbors.

So Zacchaeus wasn't someone the good folks in Jericho thought much of. He would have been an outcast among his own community. He likely had to justify to himself in some way that what he did for a living, because he could see the impact of the Roman tax system on his neighbors.

Generally, the wealthy in Luke's gospel are the bad guys. The Zacchaeus story is different. He's apparently heard about Jesus...it seems the whole town has. And while Zacchaeus knew nobody else in the community wanted to be around him, maybe he'd heard the complaint that

Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. Maybe he didn't expect this to happen to him, but he at least wanted to see this guy.

Jostled aside by people who didn't like him anyway, he climbed up the tree so he could see.

And then Jesus saw him. Before we say more about what happened, let's talk about what didn't happen.

Jesus didn't show anger toward Zacchaeus. He didn't treat Zacchaeus as something less than human. He didn't berate Zacchaeus or yell at him for selling out to the Romans. He didn't shake his head with disgust and brush Zacchaeus off, nor did he walk on by. He didn't tell him he was going to suffer eternal torment.

He said, hey, I want to come to your house.

And it was only after that, that Zacchaeus did an about face. He's not going to stop being a tax collector, but he is going to use his wealth for the good of the poor and make right any wrongs he may have committed.

This is what grace looks like. It's when an encounter with Jesus and his love and acceptance is so compelling that a person does a complete 180 with their lives. They repent. God's grace is what pulled rich Zacchaeus into the kingdom like a camel through the eye of a needle.

This is the exact opposite of how most people operate. We want to see the repentance first...then the grace. But that's not grace.

Like the disciples at the beginning of the passage, we don't get Jesus's approach. We struggle with the notion that Jesus' work to bring justice included crucifixion and we struggle to see how that works.

We need our eyes opened, like the blind man.

Because now, we in the church are called to be the bearers of that grace. We are called to be the face of the risen Christ and bring that kind of love and grace to one another...and to those outside our walls. We are called to bear that message of love and grace that will change lives, like it did for Zacchaeus.

But I think it's time for the Church...church universal, not our churches specifically, to take a look at how well we've done. Have we created encounters with Christ's love in a way that changes lives? Or are we more like the Pharisees and scribes who grumbled about Jesus?

A lot has been said about the fervent religious life of the Atlanta shooter who took the lives of 8 people, mostly Asian women, in a massacre at the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality. His church has condemned his actions.

But somehow he doesn't seem to have had an encounter with Jesus that shaped him in a way that either helped him understand his own sexuality, or to see these women as human beings made in God's image.

And before I go all off on any particular denomination, we in the ELCA have to lay claim to a white supremacist who shot and killed nine black Bible study participants in in order to start a race war. I am absolutely certain his church did not overtly promote white supremacy...but somehow, he did not have a life shaping encounter with Jesus that led him to see the evil of white supremacy is and to see black people as fellow human beings made in God's image.

It might be tempting to toss these things off as exceptions. And of course the vast majority of church people and non-church people are never going to shoot even one person, let alone 8. Individual choices matter.

But the Church...again big C...doesn't have a stellar track record when it comes to treating people the way Jesus would.

The church has in too many cases failed to bring people to an encounter with Christ's love that brings about transformation when it comes to values surrounding money, sexuality, race, and power.

Today is The International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. I'm not sure I've ever been aware of it, but in this year of increasing awareness of racial injustice and the growing tide of change, I think it's been talked about more.

One of the books I've read in my anti-racist reading is called White Too Long. It's one of the most troubling I've read because it is specifically about the church's long history of supporting, sometimes blatantly, structures and policies which lead to racial inequality.

In a survey designed to assess racist beliefs in White Christians, Black Christians, and non-Christians, White Christians were in fact more likely than either Black Christians or non-Christians to identify with racist beliefs, even though they will almost all say they are not racist.

Are we in the church bringing people to an encounter with Christ that inspires them to do the hard work of repentance and loving those who are not like us?

Our image of God has a profound impact on how we view ourselves and the world. If we view God as an angry, judgmental God, we are going to be hard on ourselves, and that will spill over into how we treat others. And at least part of our image of God comes from the church.

God does judge sin. But in Jesus, that judgment looks way different than what humans picture. It looks more like Zacchaeus. It looks more like the father celebrating a wayward son's return home.

Repentance does need to come. We saw that with the story of the rich man and Lazarus...time did run out for the rich man.

But God doesn't wait for us to repent first. God's grace has been showered on humanity from the very beginning. Against all the reasons God has to reject people, God continued to be faithful.

That grace took on a whole new level when God came to the world in the person of Jesus. Now God continues to come to us as the risen Christ in the word, in the sacraments, in the love of one another. God comes to us to offer grace, forgiveness, and a new start, over and over.

Jesus looked at Zacchaeus...he really saw Zacchaeus...the human inside, not the outer trappings he put on to survive in a harsh world.

Jesus knew what Zacchaeus was, but Zacchaeus could tell that Jesus saw him as something more than the despised tax collector. Jesus actually wanted to spend time with him, as he was, without demanding that Zacchaeus change first. It's that love and acceptance...that grace...that caused Zacchaeus to change.

That grace is for you, too. If you're like me, when you look at your life you can see things about yourself you don't like...habits and addictions, prejudices, past sins that you think God can't forgive, resentments and grudges, arrogance. You may see things about your body that you hate. Maybe there are things you are so ashamed of you hope God doesn't even know.

But God does know...and God loves you anyway. It all starts there.

Silence - image

