

Psalm 119:137-144
Luke 19:1-10

Today our second Scripture reading comes from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 19, verses 1-10. It's a long way into Jesus' ministry, and some themes have emerged in Luke's Gospel, of Jesus particularly calling down the wealthy and lifting up the poor, asking people to set aside comfort and social norms to follow him, and giving voice and attention to people with less power who might be overlooked. He's shared meals with despised tax collectors, but he's also issued uncomfortable challenges to the wealthy. As we read this story of Zacchaeus, we'll hold those things in mind. So listen now for the word of the Lord from Luke 19:

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it.² A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich.³ He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature.⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because Jesus was going to pass that way.⁵ When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today."⁶ So Zacchaeus hurried down and was happy to welcome Jesus.⁷ But all who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner."⁸ Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much."⁹ Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because Zacchaeus, too, is a son of Abraham."¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

This is a story that has received a lot of attention in many church spaces, it can feel neat and tidy, tied with a bow when Zacchaeus turns over a new leaf, gives half of his wealth away, and pays back four times the money he has taken unethically. If you've spent much of your life in church, you may have a children's Sunday School song running through your head right now, which might lead us to think that the most important part of this story is how short Zacchaeus is. But this is a strange story.

In a culture where tax collectors were known for preying on the poor, demanding more payment to line their own pockets, Zacchaeus plays a key role in a system and structure that keeps people down under layers and layers of debt and domination. He's not just a bad actor; he's playing a role in a bad system. In that way, it's a timeless story that asks us to confront the predatory systems that routinely preserve the interests of the rich and take away dignity, autonomy, and well-being from everyone else.

It's a systemic problem, but Jesus approaches it with a personalized focus. This transformative shift for Zacchaeus comes through a personal invitation from Jesus, Jesus who sees the despised tax collector in the tree, identifies him as a beloved child of God, a son of Abraham, and then invites himself over for dinner at Zacchaeus's house. If I were in that crowd, I think I too would be angry. Here is Jesus in a community of people who need him, and he's paying attention to the rich guy. In today's terms, I would be angry about Jesus spending time with billionaires, especially if it meant walking past the little

guy, folks unionizing in those same companies that brought an individual great wealth. I would be angry about Jesus meeting with politicians who don't prioritize gun safety for their own electability, while families in St. Louis are grieving this week. I would be angry about Jesus talking with heads of pharmaceutical companies while many flounder under medical debt. I know Jesus has a bigger, more gracious, more imaginative view of the world than I ever could, but in this story I mostly empathize with the crowds—who are grumbling and upset that Jesus, their teacher, leader, and savior, who has taught and demonstrated standing on the side of the downtrodden, is reaching out to this man who perpetuates a system of harm and has individually hurt many people in this community.

Jesus meets Zacchaeus with radical hospitality, acknowledges his humanity, and calls him into something greater. He sees Zacchaeus's harmful role in a predatory system, but he also sees Zacchaeus himself, worthy of grace, love, and redemption.

Like some of you, I grew up in a more evangelical church context where a lot of weight was placed on developing a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. That was a huge piece of what formed me, and something that is still deeply important to me, but there came a point in my life where I felt uncomfortable with how individualistic that perspective could be. Was the point of my faith simply to find favor with God myself? To earn a ticket to heaven and some convenient self-help along the way? In that pattern, sometimes church circles could feel insular and one-sided, only concerned with the needs and experiences of the flock itself, rather than the wider world outside of our cozy suburban bubble.

In my own life, when I found more justice-focused church communities, I was enlivened by the hope of the kingdom of God, the possibilities for Christianity to help remake the systems and structures that cause harm in our world by engaging in anti-racism work, supporting the rights of laborers, advocating for climate justice, and speaking honestly about the harm that Christian movements have caused historically and today. The possibilities of working as a community of Christ-followers to imagine and enact systemic change feel electric and hopeful.

And yet, I've come to appreciate that church is not primarily a site for community organizing or political engagement (as much as I might like it to be, nine days out from midterm elections). There's something bigger happening here. Something beyond my imagination. We gather here on Sundays to worship a living God who meets us in joy and grief, who knows us intimately and personally, but who also calls us to work towards building more justice, love, and equity here on earth. We worship a God who cares that we are spiritually and emotionally fulfilled on a personal level, who rejoices when we find goodness in community, and who helps us use that personal connection to work for more justice in the world. We worship a God who joins us in that work. And that is no small thing.

The story of Zacchaeus has been instrumental in my process of reconciling the "personal relationship with Jesus" model of Christianity from my childhood with the perspective I've found more compelling recently, that "Christ calls us to disrupt systems of oppression." Here in Luke's Gospel, Jesus meets a person who is instrumental in a harmful system, who is benefitting personally and perpetuating the pattern for others. But rather than dismissing him or shaming him, Jesus meets Zacchaeus with a personal relationship. He invites him to dinner, and something transformative happens. Here in the presence of the community he has harmed, Zacchaeus commits to pay reparations.

Now that can be a loaded term, the concept of reparations can make people uncomfortable. But truly, Zacchaeus is attempting to do a concrete form of repair, in line with instructions given throughout the Hebrew Bible for how folks who have hurt someone are called to repent, but also to match their repentance with concrete restitution. Jesus doesn't call Zacchaeus to just say sorry; there is a costly element to his transformation.

Zacchaeus makes a pledge, a promise of the money he will pay back to his neighbors. He makes it publicly, so he can be held accountable to some extent, but he also probably encounters pushback. I wonder what his conversations with his tax collector buddies look like in the weeks to come. Are they annoyed, think he's been duped by the new religious leader in town, or maybe just maybe, do they consider doing something similar in their own lives? A few months ago, when the owners of the outdoor apparel company Patagonia sold the company so that all profits would go toward work around climate change, the industry was disrupted. Patagonia will not single-handedly solve the climate crisis, but people are having more conversations about what it would look like for billionaires to give up their wealth for good.

I don't imagine that Jesus' individual encounter with Zacchaeus radically transforms the whole system of Roman power and control via tax collectors. But I do think it makes a difference. Maybe this one community starts to imagine what a more equitable system would look like. Maybe Zacchaeus is able to use his connections to change some more hearts and minds.

It matters that Jesus builds a personal relationship with Zacchaeus. In relationship, we confront our sins and our shortcomings, we can be honest about our fears and misgivings, and we can move from a place of shame to a place of transformation. Now, like the pledges we dedicate this morning, there's not certainty that Zacchaeus will follow through with his commitment, but I have hope that in relationship, there's more possibility that he will. It's the reason why we tell our stories during the stewardship campaign, and why we are called to listen to the stories of others, not just here at First Pres, but throughout Washtenaw County and the world at large.

So in our lives, in our daily work as Christians, how can we engage the relationships and difficult questions that can pull us toward a more just mosaic of hope? How can we come together with boldness, knowing that we might be called to account for our actions, but also knowing that God calls us in with love, inviting us down from the tree and guiding us toward a better, more life-giving way for all.

Just this week, our denomination announced the launch of a new initiative called the Center for Repair of Historical Harms, which will aim to repair the damage done by structural racism and white supremacy within the church and around the world. A bold goal, I know, but I am encouraged and inspired that we Presbyterians are willing to try. The center's first director, the Rev. Anthony Jermaine Ross, who was a PhD student while I was at Union Seminary, he described it as helping us "have an organized way to go about the business of repairing the harm that the PC(USA) has done to Indigenous peoples, to African Americans and to other groups." This is one piece of our mosaic of hope, one way that we face our past with boldness, recognizing the sins of American slavery and indigenous harm, but also having the courage to stay in the game, to do as Jesus did and have a meal with someone others might dismiss, and to keep working for the hope of the kingdom of God.

This center is going to be asking our congregations, “What does repair look like for you? What does repair look like for your community?” We may have more opportunities to ponder these things in the future, but I leave you with those questions, with Zacchaeus as a model. Zacchaeus, who may have felt like he couldn’t do anything to earn back the trust of his neighbors, and Jesus who took a risk, but a risk of love, inviting this man to the table, and starting a conversation.

We might not have the answers. But our mosaic of hope calls us to the table.