

Who Jesus Came to Save
(Luke 19:1-10)

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The story of Zacchaeus is an important story in the Gospel of Luke, because it is the last encounter Jesus has on the road leading to Jerusalem, so it is a kind of high point for the encounters he has had along the way. We all have known this story from childhood. And yet in some ways, I think our familiarity with it, has a way of hiding how challenging a story it is.

There is a song that was sung in Sunday schools, that expresses our fond feelings for story, yet also reveals our discomfort with it. Because the song leaves out the role that material wealth plays in the story, creating for us, a sort of blind spot. The song goes like this. “Zacchaeus was a wee little man and a wee little man was he!” And so, the focus of the song is on the fact that Zaccheaus is a “wee little man” and can’t see Jesus over the crowd and so he finds a tree to see him. It is a very cute little song.

But the first thing that the story actually says about Zacchaeus is that he is a tax collector and that he is very rich. That he is “a wee little man” is only the third detail and, the translation that tells us Zaccheaus is “short in stature” takes on a double meaning in the Greek. It also means that he is, looked on by others, as a man who is short on

character and integrity, presumably because of what he does for a living. That he is short in height is really a secondary detail that helps to illustrate how contemptuously the community views him - because they make it impossible for him to see Jesus over the crowd who are lined up along the road to see him pass by. Why should they step aside to let in this man who has done nothing but exploit the community?

But this is not what makes the story challenging, it is a challenging because it introduces risk into the lives of all who heed it. More than in any other Gospel, the Gospel of Luke ties salvation inextricably to material generosity, especially when it comes to money. And nowhere is that expressed more clearly than in this story, where generosity is the expression of those who have responded to the call of Jesus.

Giving is Life-giving

The story of Zacchaeus attacks one of our basic assumptions, and that is that accumulating money is wise and distributing it too generously is foolish. There is a kind of airtight worldly logic to this, not so different from when a flight attendant tells us to put the air mask on ourselves first before helping others with theirs. What good are we to others, if we ourselves are incapacitated? Likewise, how can we be anything but a liability to others financially unless we secure our own finances first?

I know that this understanding is fundamental to the way we live, because we relax and breath easier when money comes in and we experience tension when too much of it goes out. Material wealth is a kind of oxygen for us, especially in today's world.

But the story of Zacchaeus, works the other way around. While for us, spending too much money is the danger sign and the accumulation of it brings a sense of security and relief, in Luke's Gospel, distributing money generously becomes the life-giving part , and the over-accumulation of wealth becomes the danger sign. So that, in a culture like ours, where security and well-being are defined by the size of our bank accounts, this is a scary way of looking at what it means to experience salvation. It seems very risky.

Does Zaccheaus's moment of salvation really have to be expressed in so dangerously generous a way? Couldn't he just give back twice what he took, instead of four times? Does he really understand that his public show of generosity today means that tomorrow he will be saying goodbye to his mansion, his pool and his boat?

These questions become more acute for us as people of lesser means, and in the midst of a very uncertain economy. Who's going to pay our

heating bill or rent, if we respond to Jesus's love for us with that kind of generosity? It makes us think twice about coming down from the safety of our own trees in response to the call of Jesus.

Thankfully for us, I think that Zacchaeus is the extreme example. Unlike him, most of us do have an understanding of the life giving nature of generosity and choose to find ways to contribute where we can. And it will differ, since we live under a variety of circumstances. The story that follows Jesus's encounter with Zaccheaus addresses these very differences.

It is the parable about the people who were given one, five or ten coins by the king and told to go and put the money to work. When the king comes back to see what the return is on his investment, he is happy with what they reported, because they all show a willingness to take some degree of risk with what they are given. But there is one who draws the king's wrath. And that is the person who buried his one coin in order to give it back, rather than risk it to bring a greater return to the king.

What I think that tells us is that God "the king" knows some of us have been given more to invest in the community than others and that's ok. But what the king finds unacceptable is a life strategy that is so risk

averse that no investment is made and no value is added back into the community. So that, what I think these two stories together do, is encourage us to invest in the community, in a way that accepts risk. Even if we see ourselves as the person with only one coin, that is God's expectation. But I don't think any of this means we should take risks that are foolhardy.

I think it is ok then, to understand the way Zacchaeus gives back as a case of extreme gratitude over being saved from a life of extreme selfishness and from the loneliness that it has brought him. He is done with the emptiness of a life that is all about taking and announces to all that his life is now going to be all about giving. In other words, his example highlights in an extreme way, what has also been true of us.

The Wealthy Need Salvation Too

The story of Zaccheaus also turns another common assumption on its head. Typically, when we think of someone who needs to be saved, my guess is that we think of vagrants or economic casualties, those who are unable to fend for themselves or who have been exploited. And we think this way for good reason. These are the people who are in most need of our immediate help. But along with this focus on alleviating

material suffering, goes the assumption that there is no need to reach out to those who are rich.

It seems that we have a strange relationship with wealth. On the one hand, we admire the wealthy. We think of how nice it would be to have a beautiful mansion and expensive cars, to eat the best food, travel at will; to be able to be the one who call the shots instead of the one taking the orders. It is hard for us to think of people living under those conditions as needing anything that humble Christians like ourselves would have to offer. In some ways, it seems to me that we think of them as being “saved” by their money.

But the story of Zacchaeus reveals to us that suffering and the need for salvation is not only experience of the poor. There are also wealthy people who are suffering and lost. And this is the case with Zacchaeus. There are people who are well off who are, at the same time generous to a fault. They see their assets as an opportunity to contribute to the common life and it brings them joy.

But there is nothing value added that Zaccheaus’s occupation has brought to the community. Everything he did before climbing that tree was about sucking wealth out of the community in a way that impoverished it. And so he had to spend each day living with the

knowledge of his own smallness and with the loneliness that comes to those who's lives add up to little more than being a parasite on others.

One of the interesting things about this story is that Zacchaeus is determined to see Jesus at all. Why, if money "saves", would he even bother? He could just go home and call one of his servants to fan him, while enjoying some fine wine and cheese on the couch instead.

And it must be that he is running beside the crowd and breaking a sweat as he climbs the tree is that his money has not saved him. He wants to see Jesus because the wine and cheese and the servants and the fans have all become emptiness and an excruciating suffering to a man living every day with the knowledge of his own ugly smallness. Everyone knows who he really is and what he is doing and they despise him for it. And he knows that they are right.

It is important for us to remind ourselves that Zacchaeus is not a beggar or a blind man, a leper or a poor man with an empty stomach; the kind of man we might expect Jesus to call on. The man Jesus calls down from the tree is wrapped in wealth. And perhaps you can speculate, since he is Jesus's last encounter along the road to Jerusalem, that he may be the one who is most lost.

And when Jesus calls him down from the tree and invites himself to dinner at Zacchaeus's house, the crowd express their disapproval. As they probably saw it, the love of God should be for the poor and for people who suffer with empty stomachs. What kind of message would it send to extend compassion to the rich who have no need of it? Especially those who's wealth is built on exploitation.

But Jesus came to save the lost and that includes those among the wealthy, who are perhaps the most lost, because their inability to trust in God and live out of God's generosity is itself the cause, not only of their own misery, but the misery and suffering of so many others. So that, in a round about way it seems that in this story Jesus brings salvation to the poor as well, because when Zacchaeus responds with generosity; the floodgates open and all the assets he had sucked out of the community, come flowing back in.

Jesus's desire to have table fellowship with Zacchaeus, to be in relationship with him, has a powerful effect on him and the result is stunning. It prompts him to completely reverse his understanding about the meaning of money. Whereas his life before climbing the tree was motivated by the desire to fill his bank account, a desire that left him a lost soul, his contact with Jesus turned that motivation suddenly

on its head and his desire suddenly became to redistribute his wealth as much as possible in gratitude for being given back his life.

Even though it is a challenging story, in the various ways it explores our relationship with money, I think that it is also a beautiful story about a man who discovered its true meaning and purpose, when Jesus called him down from the tree.