

Our story this morning from Luke's Gospel is a familiar one and is often a favorite from the time we were small children. Not only is this a featured story in Children's Bibles, it is the subject of numerous songs for children. The message from these stories and songs is that Zacchaeus is deeply loved, that even though Zacchaeus is very short he has the capacity to grow, and because of that forgiveness is given to him and his household.

Now this is a wonderful take away from this story. However, as any Disney movie or Warner Brothers cartoons fan will tell you, the story works on more than one level. It could be that there is a more adult message here as well. Or perhaps, that there is more than one message that we should pay attention to.

First, let's pay attention to the setting of the story. It's in Jericho and it is a border town. Zacchaeus' profession is that of the chief tax collector who is very rich. Now his job is more than simply collecting taxes, his job is more in alignment with customs control and collecting the duties owed on goods moving across the border. He is, then, a businessman who has bid on performing a government function or duty<sup>1</sup>, much like our private sector

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher R. Hutson, "Exegetical Perspective," *Feasting on the Gospel: Luke volume 2*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville KY) 2014. 167.

contractors do for various projects involving the Base. To his fellow Jews, anyone in this profession is cooperating with Roman authorities and becomes a visible symbol of systematic oppression. He may well have been short in stature; he is definitely short in experiencing the good opinion and respect of his fellow Jews.

Now, just prior to this passage in Luke, we have the rich young man seeking eternal life and who becomes crestfallen when Jesus tells him the price. Jesus then says that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Throughout Luke's Gospel, Luke is clear that those who gain money at another's expense and to another's detriment already has his or her reward and that they have done nothing to usher in the Kingdom of God. Consider the rich man in Hades, begging Abraham to send Lazarus to ease his torment. Rich people simply do not fare well in Luke's Gospel. And yet, here we have a story of a rich man who is the hero and achieves salvation not only for himself, he achieves it for his whole household. Why?

Our underlying assumption for anyone who is a chief tax collector is that he is akin to Kenneth Lay, former CEO of Enron, or Bernie Madoff, Lehman Brothers, subprime mortgage lenders, or like those involved with

insurance giant AIG. These are folks we collectively blame for a series of economic hardships. These are people we want to see in jail. These are people we would love to see acknowledge their wrong doing and make it up to us, somehow. We simply don't have that satisfaction. Our only consolation, if you can call it that, is that the companies involved in these financial scandals no longer exist to cause us harm.

Is Zacchaeus like them? Notice that in the text Zacchaeus does not apologize for anything, nor does Jesus pronounce forgiveness or charge him to "go and sin no more." Further, it is not clear that Zacchaeus is actually repenting of anything, although a reading of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, which you heard me read, can lead us to conclude that Zacchaeus is turning over a new leaf as well as making restitution for past sins.

There is a translation issue here that makes us wrestle with the text and examine it a little more closely. What we have heard translated as "I will give to the poor" and "I will pay back" is actually in the present tense in Greek. We don't know with certainty whether Zacchaeus is saying "I give to the poor," as in "I already give to the poor;" or "as of this moment I will give to the poor." So we have to look at other elements in the story to see if

we can figure out which meaning makes more sense. For those scholars who would argue that Zacchaeus is making a claim about what he is already doing, they point to the fact that a rich man is being used as a positive example, when every other instance in Luke is that the rich serve as a negative example.

They also point to the fact that Zacchaeus has offered half of his wealth to the poor, and further, when he makes restitution for someone being overcharged, he far exceeds the amount required by Jewish law. To me, this makes Zacchaeus more akin to the Robber Barons of the 19th Century, people like John Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie - people who certainly took advantage of the average working person and who gave back out their enormous, good fortune. Today's examples might be Warren Buffet, Bill and Melinda Gates and Mark Zuckerberg, to name just a few. It is at least within the realm of possibility that Zacchaeus was "a powerbroker with a moral sensibility."<sup>2</sup>

Let's look at Zacchaeus' actions within the story. He's someone who sought out Jesus. Would a Kenneth Lay or a Bernie Madoff seek out someone like Jesus or is it more likely that someone with a sense of the

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

public good, like Bill and Melinda Gates seek out Jesus? He's also someone who experienced obstacles in seeing Jesus. He couldn't see because of his height. And he didn't let obstacles get in the way. Additionally, he didn't let his dignity or his ego get in his way either - as a grown man, he had no problem climbing a tree and overcoming the obstacles.

Zacchaeus shows us that when we seek Jesus no matter what obstacles we encounter, Jesus will always notice US. Jesus will always enter into relationship with US and bless us. Jesus will always claim us as His beloved and cherished and valued child. Whether Zacchaeus's charity was in response to his encounter with Jesus, or whether he is affirmed and blessed by Jesus because of his on-going charity and going above and beyond what was required of him, Zacchaeus continues a theme in Luke that it takes more than simply acknowledging that Jesus is the Messiah and believing in Him. While certainly both are expected, it is not enough. We are expected to live into the confession that Jesus is Lord with our whole being and with our whole lives.

So we, then, like Jesus will notice who is at the margins. We will notice the individual beyond the job title or lack thereof. We include rather

than exclude. Rich Zacchaeus gave out of his abundance. He understood God as the source of all his blessings. Zacchaeus was happy to welcome Jesus and be in relationship with Jesus. Zacchaeus' desire to know Jesus was granted as will our desire. Can we then respond with our whole being? And if so, will it be noticeable to others? I pray it will be so.

AMEN.