

Luke 19:1-10

Jesus and Zacchaeus

19 He 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 he 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 he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. ⁷ 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 he too is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

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Luke 19:1-10; 2 Thessalonians 1:1-12

Dinner with a Sinner

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My grandmother used to flirt shamelessly with my childhood dentist, Dr. Fanti. They went to school together, and I think, perhaps had a thing for each other once upon a time. She would volunteer to take me for any appointment I had and would spend time chatting with him over the tops of magazines in the waiting room. It was a little bit awkward knowing that he was also married to his dental assistant, and that my grandfather was busy at work. Small towns are like that. It's hard not to run into people you have some history with.

What I also came to know later was that they weren't allowed to date in high school. Her father was adamantly against it. You see, Dr. Fanti was Italian, and Roman Catholic, and those differences were enough to forbid any kind of intermingling, let alone dating. Now, my grandmother had a significant rebellious streak, but she also understood her limitations. She wanted to please her father, and he was known for having deep prejudices. Those prejudices got hidden and covered up over the years, but I did once find a photograph of him astride his horse in the tell-tale robes of the Ku Klux Klan.

I would like to think that those bigotries lessened over subsequent generations. My parents went to the first integrated high school in the area, where they graduated with the brother of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. who has since studied and written widely about growing up African-American in a small town, the same one my parents also grew up in. Gates still teaches at Harvard and hosts an NPR show about discovering your family tree you may have seen called: "Finding Your Roots." For the most part, my parents were encouraged by being in a non-

segregated school and still get together for high school reunions with those same friends – even though the cultural differences of growing up white or black in that area meant for some stark contrasts.

Which brings us to my growing up years. I attended an all-white school, which was that way because we moved across the river from West Virginia to Maryland when I was in Kindergarten. The schools were “better” there. Does that sound familiar to any of you? Though I was encouraged not to think of “color” or “religion” or anything else as a barrier to friendship, there still were divides in my hometown that came up in subtle ways. The prejudices had not gone away, and perhaps they were somewhat lessened, but they were told in jokes, or with innuendo, and it didn’t take long to find out if you were acting in a way that people thought you shouldn’t be.

That’s how I found out I was the rich kid. When I was little, I didn’t know. I hadn’t really thought about it. We lived in a nice house, in a nice part of town. Both my parents had been to college. Compared to today’s conversations about the growing divide of the upper 1%, that wasn’t us, but when your neighbors are just getting by working hourly jobs, they notice when you have a large corner lot up on the hill where the nice houses are.

People made assumptions about who you were if you lived “up on Horserock.” My sister and I were frequently called stuck-up or snobbish – whether we acted that way or not. It was clear that we had pretty much whatever we wanted – whether it came from my parents or my grandparents. We went on vacations to the beach every year. We had lots of clothes. We were comfortable. My sister and I both got our own cars in high school, and they ran well. What I saw as my ordinary life – others saw as advantage, as privilege.

Would I have been called out by the crowd like Zacchaeus? Why, Jesus, would you go to the house of the snobby rich kid who lives up on Horserock Road? She doesn't need you. She's a sinner. She already thinks less of all of us. She has what she needs, and we don't.

But sometimes, sometimes, those who have a comfortable life still don't have everything. They are fed on the outside, but starving on the inside. They climb up in a tree to see Jesus. And Jesus sees them back, and comes to their house for dinner. And why not? Zacchaeus could feed not only Jesus, but all the entourage he always brought with him too. Zacchaeus showed generosity and he showed courage to let go of his comfortableness and reach out to those with less. And in so doing, Zacchaeus was saved. I don't think that salvation was only about recognizing his sin, it was in recognizing his responsibility. His eyes were opened, and he saw where he could do good in the world.

Was Zacchaeus really a sinner, or was he perceived to be one because of his profession and his money? That's a good question. Was Dr. Fanti unacceptable to date because he didn't go to the same church as my grandmother? No – and today most of us would think about Protestants and Catholics as the same religion, not different ones. Was Skip Gates less worthy of an equal education to my parents because he was black? No – and like my parents he made his way to college – courageously and laboriously earning his way to a Harvard professorship. We all have our prejudices. The assumptions that we make, or that are made about us, because of our race, religion, gender, politics, or bank account often come from these situations we find ourselves in growing up.

Looking back, I can't change the fact that there weren't any black or Hispanic kids in my high school. I can't change the fact that my parents were educated and that my dad made a good living as a mechanical engineer. I can't change my Presbyterian roots. My childhood address is

still where my parents choose to live out their retirement. There's some baggage that goes along with all of those things. But what I can do is learn about how I might have held advantages I didn't even realize were giving me a head-start compared to some. I can take what I know now and live my life generously, graciously, and with an understanding that those assumptions that were part of my experience in growing up don't have to become bigotries that get passed on to my kids.

They'll have enough to contend with in their own comfortable lives. They are growing up on a corner lot in a nice neighborhood with so called "good" public schools. They hear not only the prejudices but also the bigotries and hatreds that still infect our world when it comes to money, and skin color, and religion, and gender. We're not living in an equal society quite yet. We still very much need to see and be seen by Jesus – no matter who we are or what anyone else seems to have against us.

I find the story of Zacchaeus to be a hopeful one for our time and place. Jesus was about freeing everyone – oppressor and oppressed, rich and poor, men and women, of every nationality and belief system. We read in other places in scripture, today included, about God's punishment of our enemies, and unfortunately that's often read that we are entitled to punish our enemies. Too often we have given ourselves permission, not just to have our prejudices, but to turn them into flat out hatred of the other. That's certainly not who Jesus was, nor was it what he came to teach.

Jesus also does something else that I was taught not to do as a kid. Much to the horror of the gathered crowd, he invited himself for dinner at Zacchaeus' house. At least, that's how I interpret "I must stay at your house today." Maybe it meant overnight too – but certainly he was

getting a meal out of it. Gasp. Jesus would go to that guy's house? Yes, yes he would, and it would become a loving, transformative encounter.

I had the good fortune on Friday to be able to attend the TEDx event for Richmond women. Multiple speakers shared insights from their own life stories, including a very shy Muslim lawyer. Her advice to the audience was to take at least one small step out of your own comfort zone. Get to know someone different. Attend a different worship gathering. Go to a festival. Get acquainted with someone who doesn't see the world the same as you. It's like looking up in a tree and noticing the person you need to meet, the person you need to have dinner with today.

Of course, Jesus seemed to have insight that doesn't always seem quite so available to ordinary people like us, and yet, the small steps make a difference. Share a meal. Enter someone's living space. Get to know their kids. And lives change. People change. Those who once were our enemies start to be known as our friends. I don't know if you need to go so far as to start flirting with your dentist. It's your call really. But what I get out of this story is that sometimes we need to look up, look up from our own regular routines to see who might need our love and our friendship today. Amen.