

## Making Amends

TEXT: Luke 19:1-10

*Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on June 18, 2023*

The story of Zacchaeus was one of the first Bible stories I learned as a child. We learned about it in Sunday School through a fun little song that focused on Zacchaeus being a “wee little man” who had to climb a tree to see Jesus amidst the crowds. But Jesus spotted him, told him to come down—at which point we kids got to act like parents as the song paused and we shook our fingers and said, “Zacchaeus, you come down!” before going to the happy ending of Jesus inviting himself to go visit Zacchaeus at his house. A high honor.

I get why kids would connect with the story. Kids are little and often have to go to great lengths—or heights, in this case—to literally see what’s going on. Zacchaeus as a “wee little man” connects him to the wee little children who were learning about him.

But every time I read the story, I’m struck by the missed opportunity to teach children all the parts of the story not included in the song—that Zacchaeus stole from people, that people hated him for it, and were furious that Jesus singled him out for the honor of a visit.

Further, when Zacchaeus is honored in that way, he changes his life, gives away half his wealth, and not only returns what he has stolen but gives the money back with interest. It’s a story of corruption, grace, and how that is balanced by Zacchaeus making amends. I don’t think we’re ever too young to learn those lessons. The song doesn’t even hint at the fact that Zacchaeus is a sinner in any way shape or form, let alone tell of the way he atones for what he’s done. This is not a case where just saying, “I’m sorry” is going to cut it.

So, let’s dig in and see what the “wee little man” has been up to. The story happens in Jericho, a major trade hub south of Jerusalem and close to the Dead Sea and the border with modern-day Jordan. Today it’s in the Palestinian territory of the West Bank.

By profession, Zacchaeus is the chief tax collector for the region. We see in many places in the New Testament that “tax collectors” and “sinners” are frequently lumped together, usually when Jesus’ is being criticized for hanging out with them.

It’s interesting in itself that tax collectors would be tied to the word “sinners” but still distinct from every other category of sin implied in the word. I think separating tax collectors into their own category is because being a tax collector, in and of itself, was not sinful. But, in Jesus’ day, almost all tax collectors were corrupt.

The way the system worked, not just in the colony of Palestine but across the Roman Empire, was that men bid for the job by pledging that, if they were chosen, they would raise a specific sum of money for the Roman government’s coffers. If you won the bid and got the job, your winning bid was the amount you had to raise and pay to the authorities.

However, if you should happen to raise more than your bid, you could pocket the rest yourself. No harm, no foul as the Romans saw it. Rome got what was promised and a collector who could make even more earned that bonus in their eyes. Taking in more would also show that the man was good for whatever he would bid the next year, so if you got in and became wealthy off the excess, you were pretty much guaranteed to keep the job in future years. You had a great credit score.

Obviously, such a system is a wide-open invitation for corruption and abuse, which wasn’t a problem for Rome on the surface. But blatant government corruption at the expense of the people over whom they have authority makes people angry, and *that* could inspire revolt in the colonies if it appeared that Rome was fleecing them. To avoid that, it was Rome’s practice to hire tax collectors from the local populations of each colony, making any corruption in the collection a local matter. So, tax collectors came to be viewed not only as corrupt, especially if their wealth was growing, but also as turncoats, stealing from their own people to aid an occupying force.

Zacchaeus is a Jew from Jericho who Luke describes as wealthy. He was the chief tax collector for a region that had a lot of people coming through, with lots of taxes to collect and likely high bids, so he'd risen through the ranks over time. We're not told outright that Zacchaeus had been on the take, but all the people around him would have assumed that he was, and the underlying assumption in the story is that it was most certainly true. And everyone with Jesus that day knew it. That's why they're upset when Jesus calls out to Zacchaeus and invites himself to his house.

To have dinner with a rabbi as popular as Jesus was a high honor, and no doubt many honorable people up and down the social ladder would have given their eye teeth to host Jesus in their home. But Jesus picks the cheat, the scoundrel, the man who is willing to fleece his own people for a buck. Why does Jesus do it? It tainted Jesus' reputation to be seen with someone everyone knew was corrupt, but he still very publicly announced that decision.

The people watching thought it reckless. In other cases, Jesus associates with the marginalized and outcast as an act of grace and a statement that, in the world Jesus wants to set in motion, no one is drawn outside the circle of God's care. That's certainly possible here with Zacchaeus, but I think it's also possible that Jesus was playing a bit of chess in a gambit to convey not only a message of grace, but also to get some concrete justice for a good portion of Jericho. And the key to that chess move is picking up the obligations of hospitality.

Hospitality in the Middle East, especially in biblical times, was one of the most important social responsibilities. Jesus is able to travel and even send out his disciples to evangelize other towns without making any prior arrangements or sending along provisions because, whether rich or poor, everyone was expected to take in strangers and travelers and share whatever they had according to their means.

Taking someone in and then doing all in your power to make the guest feel welcome and honored was more important than just about anything else; and the more distinguished the guest, the more a person or family gave to make sure they would be known and remembered as a good host. That backdrop of social duty puts Zacchaeus in a bind.

By publicly saying that he will be going home with Zacchaeus that day, Jesus angered the crowd, who thought he should not be honoring a corrupt person. But the crowd is not upset with Zacchaeus, they're upset with Jesus. And *that* puts Zacchaeus in a very tough spot.

The minute Jesus says, "I must stay at your house today," Zacchaeus becomes his host; and the host is bound to protect and honor the guest. Zacchaeus knows exactly why people are calling him a sinner, and he knows they're right—both about him and about Jesus' choice to stay with him.

Think about it. Why else would a wealthy man, and the chief tax collector for a major city at that, have to climb a tree just to get a glimpse of Jesus? Sure, he was short, but short people with money and power generally have no issues getting the attention of important people when they come to town. They don't have to quietly climb trees just to get a glimpse.

Zacchaeus did not for one minute expect that Jesus would see him for anything other than what he was—a corrupt official who, for most of his adult life, had been defrauding the people that Jesus most frequently championed. He didn't think Jesus would give him the time of day, let alone honor him with a visit.

But he did; and now, his life of corruption has put the reputation of his guest in jeopardy; and he is duty-bound to protect his guest. The only way Zacchaeus can save the reputation of his guest is to change his "sinner" status and make his repentance as public as Jesus' invitation.

So Zacchaeus announces to all within earshot, "Look, Lord! Here and now, I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." By the next evening, Zacchaeus probably had a line at his door that stretched halfway to Jerusalem, looking to get their money back with interest. Jesus was likely the most expensive guest Zacchaeus ever had.

Then, after, and only after, Zacchaeus has made a public promise to make amends, Jesus points out that Zacchaeus, too, is a son of Abraham, and proclaims that it's not just Jesus but salvation itself that has come to his house. Why? "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

It's possible to preach about Zacchaeus and make it be about grace and forgiveness. But I think Luke tells us that story in order to talk more directly about the proper use of wealth among God's people. That's the heart of the matter. Why do I think that? In the story itself, right out of the gate, Zacchaeus is defined by his wealth and his job as someone who collects money from others, a job almost synonymous with financial corruption. But, more than that, Luke placed this story, a story that no other Gospel writer tells, just before a parable that does appear elsewhere—in Matthew 25. It's a parable about money.

Even more specifically, it's a parable about money and earning interest on it, right after a man with a finance job promises to pay back not only what he stole, but to pay it back with interest. Zacchaeus is a finance guy. He knows the magic of compounding and how to make more with what you have.

So Zacchaeus knows that money he stole from people from years ago deprived them, not only of that specific amount, but of all the additional money they could have made from putting that money to work across time. It would not be fair to just return the money you took, unless you just took it yesterday. You need to return it with interest. And Zacchaeus knew it.

The failure to think about interest is exactly what makes the boss in the following parable so mad. There are some slight differences between the parable in Luke 19 and the one told in Matthew 25, but the essentials are the same. A wealthy man leaves town for a period of time and leaves funds with three men who are told to trade with it while the boss is gone.

When the boss returns, one man has gained 10x as much as he started with and the boss rewards him proportionately. A second man has made 5x over the original amount and he, too, is rewarded in proportion to what he has earned by putting the money to work.

But the third guy is focused on Rule #1: "Don't lose the money." So the third guy buries the cash, never puts it to work, and then returns to the boss the original amount—no more, no less. And that guy got...well, let's just say you wouldn't want to be that guy.

Putting that parable right after the Zacchaeus story is giving us the interpretive lens for the story. It's the same message. The problem is not in having money, or even in using money to make more money. The problem is hoarding money. The problem is taking more money than you need from others, which deprives them, not just of the wealth they have in the moment, but also from the generational wealth that the money could have earned them over time. It's not enough to just give back what you took, because you have still kept all that corrupt gain. You have to pay it back with interest.

When Zacchaeus promises to give half of what he has to the poor and pay back those he defrauded four times over, Jesus proclaims him to be a Son of Abraham. Well, what's that about? Zacchaeus was a Jew—that was one of the conditions for getting the tax collector job. Isn't he already a son of Abraham?

Remember when we first meet Abraham in the Bible in Genesis 12? Rewind to last week. God's first message to Abraham was that, if Abraham would be willing to do the hard thing and leave his old life behind, God would bless him SO THAT HE COULD BE A BLESSING and that, eventually, all the families of the earth would be blessed through him.

I think Jesus calls Zacchaeus a Son of Abraham because he has finally learned what Father Abraham was called to be and do. Leave the old ways behind and live a new kind of life—a life where, when blessings flow *to* you, they flow *right through* you and out to others. Blessings are not to be hoarded and counted; and they're certainly not to be stolen. They are to be spread out and multiplied until all the earth is blessed.

Becoming a blessing to others by spreading the blessings you receive was God's original mandate to Abraham. What the story of Zacchaeus adds to that is how to handle a situation when we've left that path. Once we've spent our lives hoarding blessings instead of spreading them, how do we get back to being a faithful Child of Abraham? By doing two things:

First is to go to a new country—to live differently going forward. But, as any 12-step program will tell you, that's just the beginning. We also have to do the infinitely harder work of making amends for those we have harmed, at

least to the extent that we can. And the harm is always more than just the thing taken in the moment. We need to consider the interest.

That's what most civil lawsuits are about. It's why people sue, not just for what was taken but for the interest—for everything that might have been and was not because of what was taken from them. That's also the concept behind the push for reparations.

Tomorrow we celebrate Juneteenth, marking the day that the last enslaved people in the Confederacy got the news that they were, at long last, free. They had been legally freed by the federal government in the Emancipation Proclamation on September 22, 1862, but many states decided they just wouldn't follow that law and didn't bother to tell those enslaved within their borders that they had been freed. Shocker, I know.

It took federal troops going state to state to enforce the law, and the very last place those troops went was Galveston, Texas on June 19, 1865--two years, eight months, and twenty-seven days after the Emancipation Proclamation had freed them.

By the time the enslaved people of Galveston got the news, Sheriff Zacchaeus already owed them reparations for more than 2.5 years of labor plus interest. And that's in addition to the "40 acres and a mule" that the military agreed to give them for ever having been enslaved in the first place. While just a tiny token considering what had been stolen, Forty acres and a mule would let them be able to feed their families, start a business, or otherwise support themselves.

And some of them got that forty acres and a mule. And then Lincoln was assassinated and Andrew Johnson became President—the Confederate politician Lincoln picked as his VP to try to be bipartisan and restore unity in the country. Under the Johnson presidency, all land ownership reverted to its pre-war, white owners.

Laws were passed to make sure that any opportunities to grow even a tiny amount of wealth were stripped away from African Americans as white people who had gained from Black labor were given every advantage to grow that wealth, pass it on to their children, own homes and lands, generation after generation for 158 years. If African Americans managed to rise from poverty despite all that, what they had was taken from them by force—as happened in the Tulsa Race Massacre, also known as the bombing of Black Wall Street and in countless other attacks both large and small.

A 2015 study done by an economist at the Federal Reserve Bank in Boston showed that the net worth of white families in Greater Boston was \$250,000. The net worth of Black families in the same region? \$8. "But, wait!" say some critics of the study. "They only looked at non-immigrant Black families. Black Caribbean families have a net worth of \$12,000!" Like there's not a glaring discrepancy between \$12k and \$250k as well.

But there's also a considerable gap between \$8 and \$12,000, which could be read as a sign of the generational burden carried not just by people with black skin pigment, but specifically by the descendants of those held in slavery on these shores. Choosing to survey non-immigrant Black families seems like it was part of the point. What does making amends look like after such a vast and generational horror?

Zacchaeus, come out of the tree! I need to go to your house. . .today! Last week at Annual Conference I don't know that I can say we came out of the tree, but we moved down a few branches. By a vote of 400 to 17 we approved a \$10,000 grant to each Black church in the Conference, funded from our Conference reserves. Then, by a vote of 417 to 46, we approved eliminating any and all of their Conference debt. By a vote of 413 to 34 we voted to explore restitution for land currently owned by our Conference that was stolen from Native American peoples. Another incalculable and generational horror, even before you get to the genocide.

There was lots of debate; many questions raised and answered. Not everyone was comfortable, and I'm sure we didn't do it perfectly, that this is just the beginning, and that there will be bumps along the way. But in what John Wesley called "Holy Conferencing," the conviction in the room was built and it felt to me that the initial pain turned to joy for all but a very few.

And, in the end, I think we were closer to being children of Abraham than we were when Conference began. We made a small dent in thinking of the blessings we have received and stored up over the years as being tools to bless

others, beginning with those from whom blessings have been intentionally and systematically withheld for centuries.

Are you up in the tree? Is Crawford up in the tree? What might it look like to stop trying to see Jesus from a distance and have him come to our house; to become children of Abraham and become a blessing to all families of the earth. For Zacchaeus, coming down wasn't a guilt trip, it was joy. And not only Jesus but salvation came to his house. Amen.