



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

Today Salvation has Come to This House Luke 19:1-10

Fr. William Klock

June 21, 2015 – Trinity 3

As we've been making our way through Luke's Gospel, we've heard a lot about repentance: about letting go of everything that isn't Jesus so that we can take hold of Jesus in faith with both hands. Jesus went to everyone, but the people who received him were mostly people who were outsiders: people who were poor, who were sick, who were unclean, who were sinners, people who were rejected or at the bottom of society. Pharisees, scribes, religious leaders, the wealthy, and the powerful were present too and Jesus preached to them, but while the poor people embrace Jesus and are embraced by him in return, the wealthy and the powerful have nothing but condemnation for Jesus and as far as Jesus interacts with them, it's mostly to rebuke them. But this all makes perfect sense. The wealthy and the powerful had much and they trusted in it. And they weren't just wealthy; they were heavily invested in the world's way of doing things, whether that was Caesar's system of social and economic *quid pro quo* or the religious hierarchy of Israel and of Jerusalem. They weren't ready to let any of that go in order to walk in faith with Jesus. This is why the rich young ruler went home sad and it's why Jesus said that it's easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom. The poor, the sick, the sinners, the outsiders, on the other hand, had nothing. They were at the bottom. They weren't invested in anything. It was much easier for them to take hold of Jesus in faith. And we've been seeing all of this play out over the course of Jesus' ministry.

This morning we'll begin Chapter 19. Jesus enters Jericho. Remember that he's on his way to Jerusalem. Jericho was the last stop. It was about 20 kilometres away, at the bottom of the mountains. Jesus' ministry will reach its culmination in Jerusalem. The travelling-preacher phase of his ministry is almost over, but he has this one last encounter that St. Luke tells us about. He meets Zacchaeus and Zacchaeus is important. If we've been reading about Jesus condemning the rich and powerful and assuming that there's no place for them in the kingdom, and if we've assumed that the kingdom is only for the poor and the disenfranchised, and if we've started to turn the kingdom or following Jesus into a formula, Zacchaeus ought to pull the rug out from under all of that. Zacchaeus breaks all the formulas. Zacchaeus brings us back to the basic message of Jesus: the kingdom God is here, the Messiah has come to save us, repent—let go of everything—and take hold of Jesus. Rich or poor, slave or free, Jew or gentile, get go of everything and have life by taking hold of Jesus instead. If the rich young ruler left you thinking it was impossible to give up what you have, Zacchaeus gives us hope. What Jesus said is true: With God all things are possible. With God, even a corrupt, hardened, cheating rich man can turn around.

Look at Luke 19:1-4.

He entered Jericho and was passing through. And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small in stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way.

Luke tells us that Zacchaeus was a "chief tax collector". In all of the ancient Greek literature we have, this is the only place where this word is

used, so we can't be sure of its meaning, but it seems to suggest that Zacchaeus was some kind of "district manager". Other men collected taxes and tolls from the people and Zacchaeus collected the money from them to give to the authorities. At every level someone took a cut and the cuts got bigger the higher things went, which is why Zacchaeus was such a rich man.

And this tells us something about his status. Zacchaeus was rich and he was powerful. He had status with the authorities—with the Romans or the Herodians—but he was despised by everyone else. Think of that phrase we see repeatedly in the Gospels: "tax collectors and sinners". The two often go together. Even an honest tax collector got lumped together with sinners. No one likes taxes and so no one likes tax collectors, but remember that for the Jews, a tax collector was a collaborator with their gentile oppressors—a tax collector was working for the enemy. Zacchaeus is a Jewish name; he was a Jew. That means that in working for the enemy, people would have seen him as a traitor. But it wasn't just working for the enemy. Remember that there's a religious or spiritual element here. The Jews believed they were God's people. They looked forward to the coming of the Messiah, because they believed that the Messiah would destroy their oppressors and all their enemies. So a tax collector wasn't just on the wrong side politically; he was on the wrong side spiritually. To top it off, a tax collector was perpetually unclean because of his contact with gentile—he couldn't participate in the system of temple and sacrifices, which just confirmed the idea that he was out of God's favour. So everyone would have known who Zacchaeus was, but everyone would have despised him.

Luke's setting up some tension for us. On one hand, Jesus always embraces outsiders and they always seem to embrace him back. Jesus has good news for them and they truly do take it as good news. On the other hand, it's

the wealthy and powerful who oppose Jesus. We've even been told that wealth is barrier to entering the kingdom. And now we have Zacchaeus. He lives in both these worlds. He's rich and powerful, but he's also an outsider. Again, if we've started to build a formulaic picture of the kingdom, Luke's about to break it with the story of Zacchaeus.

We get the first hint of this when he tells us that Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus. Specifically, he wanted to see who Jesus was. He'd no doubt heard about Jesus; now he wanted to see him in person. And yet Zacchaeus had a problem: he was short. That wasn't a problem in itself. There certainly would have been other short people in the crowd and people would let them through to the front so that they could see Jesus. But no one would do that for Zacchaeus, because no one liked him. I don't think they pushed him to the back. Zacchaeus wasn't the sort of person you'd want to antagonise. The people probably just ignored his attempts to get through the crowd to see Jesus. But he's persistent. In fact, we get a sense of just how eager he is to see Jesus—just how much he really, *really* wants to see Jesus.

The crowd was gathered along the road where Jesus was, so Zacchaeus runs up the street to a spot where the crowd's thinner and he climbs into a tree that hangs over the street. Think of the director or chief executive of the regional Canada Revenue Agency office over in Surrey. I don't know who that person is, but he or she holds an important and high-ranking position—a chief tax collector. I expect that he or she dresses the part and acts the part. Zacchaeus would have looked and acted the part of a chief tax collector too. He would have looked and acted the part of a rich man. He wore expensive clothes and dressed and acted professionally. And yet imagine that district supervisor, maybe wearing his expensive business suit and shoes, hearing that Jesus was

coming to town. Imagine him, unable to see through the crowd, *running* down the street to a clear spot, and then climbing into a tree so that he could see. Not very dignified. In fact, if an important person did something like that today, you can expect everyone would be talking about it. It might make the evening news if a reported happened to catch it. Other high-powered and important executives who also wore Armani suits would probably look at him with less respect than they had before. In Zacchaeus' case, he was already despised by the people. Now this little man who's climbed a tree to get above the crowd looks foolish to boot. And yet he does it knowing that people will not only despise him, but make fun of him for being short and now for being undignified—and he does it because he *has* to see Jesus.

And Zacchaeus' persistence pays off. Luke goes on in verses 5-6:

And 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.” So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully.

Jesus noticed Zacchaeus just like everyone else did. He saw a man in dignified clothes sitting in a very undignified way in a tree hanging over the road. But whereas everyone else saw a hated taxman making a fool of himself, Jesus saw a man who was so eager to see him that he didn't care what the crowd thought of him. Jesus must have asked someone who the man in the tree was. Whoever told him his name probably spat it out: “That's Zacchaeus! He's the regional supervisor for the Roman tax collectors. He's such a dirtbag and now look at him. What a fool!” Some people may have been pointing and laughing at Zacchaeus, but Jesus does just the opposite: he walks under the tree branch, looks up, and tells

Zacchaeus to hurry down and then invites himself for lunch.

Jesus sees the same thing in Zacchaeus that he saw in Blind Bartimaeus, who was just outside the city crying out for Jesus to have mercy on him. The more the crowd tried to shut him up and push him out of sight, the louder he cried out to Jesus. Jesus saw the blind man's faith and now he sees the same kind of faith in Zacchaeus. While the crowd jeers at Zacchaeus, Jesus acknowledges his faithful persistence and asks for his hospitality. We don't have to imagine how overjoyed Zacchaeus was, because Luke tells us: “he received him joyfully”. I expect he scrambled out of the tree with as little dignity as he scrambled into it, but he didn't care; Jesus was coming to his house!

The rich young ruler went away sad, because he couldn't bring himself to let go of his wealth in order to follow Jesus. Zacchaeus responds like the blind beggar, who followed after Jesus and gave glory to God. But the crowd isn't so enthusiastic. They gathered to see this man who was preaching amazing things and who was doing amazing things: giving sight to the blind, casting out demons, preaching good news to the poor. Just like so many other people, they were ready for the Messiah. They wanted God to come and deal with their enemies, lead them out of their exile, and take up his throne on Mount Zion. And now here was Jesus. They'd all heard about his claims to be the Messiah and here he was on his way to Jerusalem, just a day's journey away. If Jesus really was the Messiah—and they hoped he was—something big was about to happen!

And then Jesus stopped to talk to the most despised man in town—the man whom Jesus should have rebuked and struck down as a traitor if he really was the Messiah—and instead of rebuking him, in stead of calling down fire and brimstone on him, Jesus

invites himself to Zacchaeus' house for lunch and off they go arm-in-arm. Look at verse 7:

And when they saw it, they all grumbled, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner."

Again, the crowd shows that the Jews had the Messiah and they had his kingdom backwards. They wanted the Messiah to come to judge and condemn sinners. They can't even begin to understand that Jesus has come to redeem and restore sinners. That's something we need to remember when we're tempted to self-righteousness and when our attitudes towards sinners is one of judgement and condemnation. Brothers and sisters, our condemnation—even Jesus' condemnation—can't add anything to the condemnation we all stand under as sinners. That's why Jesus came not to condemn, but to redeem. He has redeemed us, and remember you and I—all of us—are all sinners. We've been given grace ourselves instead of the condemnation we deserve. Our calling now is to share the good news of Jesus' redeeming death and resurrection with fellow sinners. In Jesus, God has shown us grace and the point of grace is that we don't and never did deserve it; by definition, grace is *unmerited* favour. The fact that God has given us his grace doesn't mean that we can look down in judgement on fellow sinners. Just the opposite: it means that we have an obligation to share the grace of Jesus with them.

Getting back to Zacchaeus: When he heard the crowd grumbling he was probably mortified. He was thinking that Jesus had no idea who he was, but now the crowd's going to out him as a chief tax collector. If Jesus finds out, it'll spoil everything! And so he justifies himself to Jesus. Look at what he says in verse 8:

And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of

my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold."

It's interesting to me that the way the story is usually told, these are things that Zacchaeus commits to doing *after* his encounter with Jesus. And yet the verbs here, in both the Greek and in our English translation, are *present* tense. These aren't things that Zacchaeus is planning or committing to do in the future; they're things he's *already* doing. And this is why he tells Jesus about them in response to the crowd's grumbling. The crowd doesn't think Jesus has any business feasting with Zacchaeus. (Remember that feasting with the Messiah was the great symbol of the coming age of redemption.) In eating with Zacchaeus Jesus was showing him that he had a share in the kingdom. And the crowd's saying, "No, Jesus! This man's a sinner—he's tax collector scum! He's the enemy! Don't welcome him."

Other people justified themselves to Jesus by appealing to their fasting and praying or to their tithing. The rich young ruler thought he was in good standing because he'd never murdered, committed adultery, lied, or stolen, and because he honoured his parents. But Zacchaeus doesn't appeal to any of those things. Instead he tells Jesus that something changed in his life and as a result he's now giving away half his wealth to the poor and he's making restitution to the people he cheated by giving them back fourfold. This is *really* generous. To give some perspective, in that culture giving 20 per cent of your wealth to the poor was considered generous—more than that was considered foolish. If you were convicted of extortion, the penalty for restitution was 20 per cent (Leviticus 5:16; Numbers 5:7), but Zacchaeus gives far more than that. What Zacchaeus is doing goes beyond generosity and beyond restitution and looks like a thank offering—something motivated by a dramatically

changed and reoriented heart.¹ And this is something that Zacchaeus has *already* been doing.

I'm speculating here more than I usually do, but what this strongly suggests to me is that Zacchaeus had undergone a conversion experience well-before Jesus arrived in Jericho and met him under the sycamore tree. Zacchaeus may have heard the preaching of John the Baptist and his message to repent because the kingdom was at hand. Luke told us back in 3:21 that "tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, 'Teacher, what shall we do?' And he said to them, 'Collect no more than you are authorized to do.'" Zacchaeus may have been one of those tax collectors. He repented. He cleaned up his practises and began making restitution. And then he began hearing word about Jesus and his ministry. He heard that Jesus was preaching good news to the poor. He heard about the way Jesus cared for the poor and welcomed them into the kingdom, and so without ever having seen or met him or even hearing Jesus preach, Zacchaeus began patterning his own life after that of Jesus in his generosity to the poor. Zacchaeus repented and reoriented his life around the kingdom of God.

And the people didn't accept it. Like so many people, they just couldn't let go of their hope of seeing Zacchaeus, the collaborator and traitor, someday going down in flames when the Lord came to judge people like him. He might be generous, but he was still a tax collector. He was generous, but they could continue to write him off because he never went to the temple to offer sacrifices for his sins—he was unclean from his contact with gentiles and he couldn't. And that meant that no matter how much he turned his life around, he would still be a sinner. No priest had yet to declare him forgiven and clean.

¹ See Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), pp. 1520-1521.

And that makes Jesus response all the more remarkable:

And Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

Jesus affirms Zacchaeus’ repentance and all that he’s done. He recognises his change of heart and he assures him of his place in the kingdom: “Today salvation has come to this house.” While everyone else considered Zacchaeus a traitor to his people, Jesus sets him before the crowd as an example of what looks like to be a *true* son of Abraham. And Jesus reminds the crowd of his ministry: “the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” He didn’t come to affirm the righteous, but seek out the lost and to bring them back to the fold—he came specifically to seek out people like Zacchaeus and to bring them back. And in that Zacchaeus represents us all. The people of Jericho considered his actions treasonous. They looked forward to the day that Zacchaeus and his Roman friends would be judged and punished by God along with all the other sinners. But consider, Brothers and Sisters, that every one of us is a traitor. Our sin is cosmic treason against the God who lovingly created us. It matters little how big or small our sin, whether we’ve sinned a little or sinned a lot, because the holiness of God, against which our sin is measured, is *perfect*. All of us, little sinners and big sinners alike, are traitors. All of us alike, little sinners and big sinners, deserve judgement and condemnation and eternal death. But Zacchaeus reminds us of the loving and merciful grace of God. Jesus came for people like us. He came to seek us out and to save us from judgement. All we need do is take hold of him in faith. It’s hard. The rich young ruler is like many of us: not ready and not willing to give up the wealth that had become his god.

Or maybe we’re like the people of Jericho, self-righteous and proud and judgemental: not ready to let go of our self-righteousness, shabby as it is. We find security in judging and condemning sinners worse than ourselves. Zacchaeus, though, reminds us that with God all things are possible. Even a cheating, selfish, money-grubbing, traitorous tax collector can let go and take hold of Jesus, and if Zacchaeus can do it, so can we with God’s help. If you believe and struggle to let go, pray with the Father who brought his son to Jesus for salvation: “I believe, but help my unbelief!” Jesus came to seek and to save the lost and he will build and strengthen your faith, he will give you the faith and the grace to let go that you might instead take hold of him.

He offers us a measure of that grace here at his Table today. He offers us a foretaste of his kingdom, just as he did that day when he invited himself to eat with Zacchaeus. We gather here as an expression of our faith, we gather here to meet Jesus as Zacchaeus sat in the tree, waiting for him to pass by so that he could get a glimpse. And here at the Table Jesus comes to us; here he feasts with us. And if we will repent and embrace him with the joy we see in Zacchaeus, he says to us: “Today salvation has come to this house. Today I have feasted with the true sons and daughters of Abraham. Today I have sought out and saved the lost.”

Let us pray: Gracious Father, strengthen in us the gift of faith that we might take hold of Jesus as eagerly as Zacchaeus did. Give us faith that pries our hands from the things of this world, that we might give them up for the sake of Jesus and use them not to further our own gain or comfort or agendas, but to build your kingdom. Strengthen our faith as we come to your Table this morning to feast with your Son and remind us that he has come to seek and to save sinners like us and to reconcile us to you. Amen.