

Seeing Who Jesus Sees

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Sunday, Nov, 10, 2019

Luke 19:1-10

First Presbyterian Church, Durham

You might not know this, but a lot of churches have their stewardship campaigns in November instead of in October, like ours. November is the season of thanksgiving and harvest with all that good language in the air about gratitude, abundance and sharing. Without even knowing it, I suspect, our culture does a better job of talking theologically in November than we do in December. So why not dovetail with that, when we want to talk church budgets, service & mission giving and pledges? Especially when the lectionary gives you a text in which Jesus meets someone who give 4 times what they owe. Now *that* stewardship letter writes itself. Cris and the committee's work would be simple: Everyone, quadruple your pledges, and you, too, can have Jesus over for dinner. Or at least the head of staff. Which is pretty much the same thing. Mindy is delightful dinner company. It's a perfect plan.

But it's *not* stewardship season. This is *not* a sermon about generosity, unless you really are considering revising your pledge up by a factor of 4, in which case you can stop listening right now and go do that. Perhaps you are *not* even Zacchaeus, at least *not* today. And there is one more *not* – and this might be the most shocking thing I say today – Zacchaeus is *not* short. That's right, you've been lied to for years. That song that goes "Zacchaeus was a wee little man and a wee little man was he?" Baloney. Popycock. Bull feathers.

Maybe. The Biblical text, the original Greek passage in Luke's Gospel, before it is translated into English, is ambiguous. "Zacchaeus was trying to see who Jesus was," we read "but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature." In Greek, the "he" in the "because he was short in stature" could mean Zacchaeus, like the song says, but it could also mean Jesus. "Zacchaeus was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd Zacchaeus could not, because Jesus was short in stature." Mind. Blown. Our Lord and Savior, the one born in the manger and crucified on the cross, is below average height. Friends, we have a lot of work to do. We're going to have to go back through every piece of Renaissance art and every children's Bible with an eraser, and we redraw images of Christ. You start with Michelangelo and I'll start with the Rhyming Bible.

Okay, so maybe it doesn't change who Jesus is if he's short. He's still fully human and fully divine, and he's still headed to Zacchaeus' house for the evening. But maybe, maybe it does change who the chief tax collector is if he's taller. Because even though we know that no one gets to decide their height, somewhere in the back of your head, if you're like me, you sorta lump Zacchaeus' shortness in with his status as super rich and powerful, super corrupt, and super capitulating with the Roman oppressors. Being short makes Zacchaeus even worse in our imaginations. He's so bad that he can't see Jesus without climbing up a tree, for God's sake. He looks like every short, plump villain you've ever seen in a children's cartoon. (Because cartoon villains are either short and round or tall and unbelievably skinny. It's the law.) But that's not who Zacchaeus is. And the reason that he can't see Jesus is that Jesus is hard to see.

So, that's one Biblical myth exploded – or at least deflated – through the amazing power of ancient language grammar. Blessed are the ones who wear “I am silently judging your grammar” t-shirts, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Now, let's tackle another ambiguous bit of the text. This one is verb tense, which is even more exciting than noun-pronoun agreement. “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.” We think it means that regular-height Zacchaeus is making a promise to change his bad behavior, based on the transformative experience of Jesus inviting himself over for dinner. But some Biblical scholars, whose grasp of ancient Greek is better than my grasp of modern English, think the verbs are in an ongoing present tense, not a future tense. “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I am giving to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I pay back four times as much.” It's subtle but significant. Maybe Zacchaeus isn't the arch villain of Vichy Jericho. Maybe he is Saint Zacchaeus of the streets, instead. Maybe his superpower is generosity in the midst of government bureaucracy. Maybe Zacchaeus isn't the model for transformation, but rather the model for faithful wealth management. As far as Jesus is concerned in Luke's gospel, the point of wealth is to share it. Just ask the rich young ruler and all those camels standing in line to take their turn limbo-ing into the eye of a needle. Zacchaeus is no longer the sinner we thought he was, but instead the saint we ought to be.

But the people can't see that. They can't see him. Or maybe they don't want to see him. They are so busy crowding around Jesus, trying to get a piece of the Messiah, that they're not really looking at who may or may not be on the outside looking in, no matter how tall they actually are and whether or not they are already practicing transformative generosity and redistributive justice. It's hard to see people as they are, especially when we think we already know who they are. The narratives we write in our heads, the assumptions we make, the info we collect from our well-curated sources that confirm our pre-existing biases, they all help us to look past folks to more important people, like Jesus. We, too, have no love lost for the super rich and powerful, the super corrupt, the super taxing tax collectors who work with our Roman overlords even though they're Jewish just like everyone else. We'd much rather gaze at Jesus. He's just so wonderful to look at. The reason that Zacchaeus needs to run and climb and get sweaty and watch his footing to see Jesus isn't Zacchaeus. It's us. We don't see the Zacchaeuses of this world or we don't want to see them.

But Jesus does. Jesus sees Zacchaeus like he sees so many people, the ones we ignore. Jesus calls him by his name. Jesus names him as a part of the community, this “son of Abraham.” Jesus promises to eat with him, which is a sign of approval, much to the grumbling grumblers' chagrin. Jesus blesses him in all of the ways that his community has not, sees him when his community does not, which might just be Jesus' superpower. Blessed are those who see their neighbor, for they will be like God.

But woe to those who do not see. Woe to us who do not see. Woe to us who do not see our neighbors above us or below us or behind us. Woe to us who believe we have seen all there is to see, who have written off others as too short in stature, too short in morals, or too short in worldview. Woe to us who have had a short fuse with others because it's so much easier to blow up at someone than to see them as a child of Abraham, in all their humanity and fragility. Woe to us who are the crowd around Jesus, lest we crowd out others in our rush.

One of the joys of being a minister is that I get to officiate weddings. In the weddings that I have officiated, at least those that have been for a woman and a man, something occurs that is also happening here with the crowd, Jesus and Zacchaeus. Typically, the groom stands up front with the attendants and me. And as soon as the doors open up and the bride comes in, everyone looks at her, sometimes even standing, as if to get as close a look as they can, as if she is the most important person in the room. She's like Jesus, walking down the aisle in Jericho. She is important, deeply important to that day and what's going on in that moment. But in most of these weddings, the congregation, the crowd, fails to see who she is looking at. She is looking at the groom. Jesus is looking at Zacchaeus, whom she, whom Jesus sees for who he really is, a beloved and beautiful child of God, a kind soul who really isn't that short when you clean him up, a son of Abraham. It's important to look at him, too. If we ignore him, if we miss him, if we just see him as a place-filler next to her in all her glory, we miss what is really going on, we miss the importance and the humanity, the saint and redistributive justice.

In our rush to look at the bride Jesus, who don't we see? As we strive to get as close as we can to Christ as he passes by down the aisle, who does he see and name and bless that we do not? Where are our blind spots? Who don't you see? That's who we need to be looking out for. That's who we need to be including. That's who we need to be eating dinner with. The people whom our traditions and culture have marginalized. The people whom grammar has failed and who have been translated into someone they are not. The people whose public face we know well enough not to wonder about who they really are when no one is looking. The people whose job does not define them. The people who are fighting a private war that no one else knows about. The people who are saints when all we see are sinners. The people who aren't that short up close.

Sometimes, it is not enough to look for Jesus or even to look at Jesus. Today, we are called to step back and see who Jesus sees. That's where the salvation is. Amen.