

October 30, 2016. Pentecost 24, Proper 26. Luke 19:1-10 Nigel Taber-Hamilton  
St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland.

Tax collectors!! Last week we had the hired lackey, this week we have the wealthy Government Contractor, the “main man,” the “chief” tax collector. You’ll recall from last week that tax collectors were hated for their collusion with the Roman occupying force, and their willingness to exploit their fellow Jews for personal gain. So wouldn’t you expect Jesus to be out front decrying Zacchaeus? Isn’t he the perfect “poster villain,” the man everyone should learn to loathe?!!

But Jesus not only calls on this vertically-challenged chief tax collector by name – “Zacchaeus” – he says to him “.....I must stay at your house today.” I have to say “shocking!!” If you’re a Trump supporter then it would be like hearing Jesus say to Clinton: “Hillary, I must stay at your house today.” And, of course, if you’re a Clinton supporter it would be like hearing Jesus say to Trump: “Donald, I must stay at your house today.” (I can’t help you with an illustration if you’re an independent!). At the very least, then, this story invites us to look at our own prejudices.

I suppose you might claim that the Zacchaeus tale is a perfect conversion story here – a hated tax collector being blessed by Jesus – but if it is, then the details simply aren’t just plausible they’re impossible:

- that a chief tax collector would want to see Jesus;
- that Jesus would stay in his home;
- that it would be revealed that this sinner exceeded the law by his generosity;
- that Jesus would declare not just him but his whole household saved

And more even than that, if we were to embrace this as a conversion story then Jesus’ inviting words turn our usual theological formulas about repentance on their heads. Rather than forgiveness being a precondition for repentance, there’s no expression of penitence or repentance by Zacchaeus before Jesus pronounced his blessing and his declaration of the righteousness not only of Zacchaeus but his whole household as well. Zikes! Once again we have to set aside our preconceptions about what this story is about – and about the way God works – and be open to a different, deeper understanding!

You begin to mine that deeper understanding when if you accept that not only did Jesus and Zacchaeus already know each other well and in a positive way but also that this isn’t a conversion story – Zacchaeus wasn’t turning over a new leaf as much as he was lifting up an old one for all to see that he was already a righteous tax collector known and loved by Jesus!

So what do we have here, really? Rather in the way parables are intended to be shocking, Jesus’ own actions here were intended to be shocking. Here – on public view – Jesus called to someone despised by his neighbors for being a tax collector, welcomed him unconditionally, proclaimed that the quality of their relationship was significantly profound that he could stay in Zacchaeus’ home, and declared this chief tax collector to be so righteous that salvation had already come to his home!

If that’s true for a hated tax collector, then is anyone outside of God’s love, grace, and care? For

Jesus' listeners surrounding him on the road through the dusty streets of Jericho, Zacchaeus was one more example of the impossible possibility that Jesus embodied and embodies: that no one – not any of them, not any of us – not even Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton! – is outside of God's loving embrace.

And think on this: Jesus said of Zacchaeus, a very rich man who, even in the face of this remarkable generosity would remain rich, "Today salvation has come to this house." In other words, there's plenty of hope for the rich of the world as soon as they – we – notice the poor in front of us and do something serious about that. Even the most marginalized and despised of the rich – the Chief tax collectors – have a place in the bosom of Abraham, in the community of the blessed, when they seek the right treasure, if they share generously of the treasure they have. There's good news in that for all of us!

So much for what Jesus was saying! But what's going on with Zacchaeus? I think Zacchaeus displays the chief attribute of all disciples: he wanted to see Jesus and when he did he had great joy in his presence. This rich chief tax collector was so keen to see Jesus that he wouldn't let anything or anyone get in his way. Think about it: a wealthy person, someone of status dressed in rich robes, climbing a tree like a child to glimpse over the crowd and see Jesus?! We've heard or seen that compulsion before – Remember the hope of the Greeks who came to speak with Phillip in John's Gospel (12:20-24) – remember what they said? "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

You know, this story is promise – or perhaps the embodiment of a promise – that anyone -- anyone! -- who desires to see Jesus **will** see Jesus. In fact, more than that, anyone who desires to see Jesus will, in turn, be seen by Jesus and in this way have their joy made complete.

And you know, perhaps the most striking thing is what verse 10 tell us. It says this: "The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." By any definition, that's all of us, in one way or another. And the irony of the whole passage – the story of the passionate seeking-out of Jesus by Zacchaeus – the irony is that the people who seek Jesus tend to find that it's actually Jesus who's seeking them – us – all along.

Reading on beyond this particular passage, there's another remarkable truth: Zacchaeus' rejoicing here expands into the rejoicing of the whole multitude of the disciples in verse 37 as they welcome their king who "comes in the name of the Lord." Zacchaeus was climbing a tree to catch a glimpse of the king, but the difference is that when Jesus found him and finds us, he doesn't then offer a welcoming, regal wave and retreat to a palace. As Jesus puts it, salvation comes to Zacchaeus' house. Jesus follows us home.

Let us pray. O God, may we share the same joy expressed by Zacchaeus when he saw Jesus, and the same commitment to be generous from the wealth that we have received. May we continue to be listen for God's call, opening our hearths and our hearts to the presence of Jesus that we may, through his indwelling Spirit, fulfil every good resolve and work of faith. In God's name we pray. AMEN.