

The 23rd Sunday after Pentecost October 31, 2010
Luke 19:1-10 “How Salvation Comes”
the Rev. Michelle Slater

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. 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 down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, ‘He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.’ 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.’ Then Jesus said to him, ‘Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.’”

Does anybody here know the old children’s song about Zacchaeus, up in the tree?

Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he.
He climbed up in a sycamore tree, for the Lord he wanted to see.
And as the Saviour passed him by, he looked up in the tree,
And he said, ‘Zacchaeus, you come down from there;
For I’m going to your house today, for I’m going to your house today’.

Zacchaeus came down from that tree, as happy as he could be,
He gave his money to the poor, and said: ‘What a better man I’ll be.’

Yes, that’s it. (It has actions too, but I thought I would spare you that!) It’s a catchy little retelling of our story from the Gospel of Luke this morning. And a good summary of the way we’re used to hearing and interpreting that story, or at least, the way I am.

As the song says, a “wee little” man named Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus as he walks through his town. However, he isn’t just a short man, he is a bad one too, at least in the eyes of his neighbours. He is a bad man because he is a tax collector, and not just any tax collector, but the chief tax collector of the region. So, he is a bad man because he has gotten rich from betraying his people, working with the Romans, their hated and feared occupiers.

Yet, this wee little, rich, bad man wants to see Jesus. Because he’s short, he climbs up a tree to see Jesus go by, only for the reverse to happen, for Jesus to see Zacchaeus himself. Jesus invites himself over to Zacchaeus’ place for a visit, which provokes the rest of the crowd. After all, to receive someone’s hospitality, to eat with them, is a sign of social approval, a signal that you share the same values and social status. So naturally the crowd voices their disapproval. Here is someone they admire and honour, Jesus, asking them to accept and honour Zacchaeus, someone they don’t trust, someone they despise.

But before Jesus can respond to the crowd’s challenge, Zacchaeus does instead, saying, “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.” Jesus then celebrates Zacchaeus change of heart,

proclaiming, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.” It’s a classic repentance story, of someone who has an encounter with Jesus and is changed forever, transformed into a more generous person who vows to be a better person from that point forward.

However...there is a fly in that ointment, a flaw in that interpretation. Just recently, some scholars are pointing out that Zacchaeus’ words have been mistranslated from the original Greek. Mistranslated as the *future* tense, rather than as the *present* tense, which they *actually* are. So, contrary to what we heard David read earlier, Zacchaeus isn’t pledging, “Look, half of my possessions I **will** give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I **will** pay back four times as much.” Rather, Zacchaeus is defending himself: “Look, half of my possessions I **give** to the poor...[and] I **pay** back four times” – as in, right now, already, as a matter of practice.

But how on earth did such a mistranslation happen? And remain so for such a long period of time? Well, it turns out those who translate the verbs as future-oriented appeal to a grammatical category called a present-future tense. The trouble is, as the *only* occurrence of this verb tense is right here in **this** story. It looks like the translators of the past couldn’t conceive that this character, this rich tax collector, could actually already be a faithful person. Couldn’t imagine that he could already be “saved” without needing to repent first. So rather than translate this sentence in the present tense, they created a new grammatical category that occurs once and only once, to make sure this story was about what they thought it was: our need to repent in order to receive salvation.

Well, if it’s not a classic repentance story after all, that is kind of disappointing at this point in the year, when the Finance Committee members bite their nails anxiously, wondering if we’ll make our budget this year. We could really use a story right about now that calls us to encounter Jesus and repent, to be changed into more generous and giving people. But it looks like that’s not really what it’s about. If the verbs are in fact, in the present tense, then what does Zacchaeus’ story really mean for us?

Well, the first thing it means is that Zacchaeus actually already was a generous person, a good person, a person who tried hard. Even though his job made him unpopular with others. Even though his job maybe made himself uncomfortable at times. Even though he was rich compared to his neighbours. Zacchaeus was still trying to live his life as faithfully as he could. After all, if he gave half of his profit to the poor, that’s a fifty percent tithe, which is a lot more than 1 tithe. And he makes it a practice to correct any unjust extra payments, repaying them four times over.

So, rather than reward Zacchaeus for his repentance and change of life with the reward of salvation, Jesus actually affirms Zacchaeus’ *present* good works by declaring that salvation has come to his house, and proclaims that Zacchaeus is indeed “one of us,” a son of Abraham. And by re-claiming Zacchaeus as a member of the covenant, by honouring him in the eyes of his neighbours, Jesus then restores him to the community.

But what it also means is that there really isn’t any repentance in the story. Zacchaeus does not repent of his occupation; he does not give up being a chief tax collector, remaining in the pay of the hated occupying power, continuing to be complicit in the sometimes dishonest, sometimes violent practices of the empire. In other words, Zacchaeus remains compromised, impure, sinning. Yet Jesus says, even though this is still the case, that “salvation has come” to his house.

It makes you wonder what salvation, or being saved, really means, doesn't it. For Zacchaeus, it doesn't require a complete change of life, a sacrifice of all he is and has and does. In fact, salvation is offered to Zacchaeus even in his imperfect, complicated, complicit state in the world. Salvation, after all, despite all the baggage that many of us bring to the word, means simply, **healing...wholeness...deliverance from what binds or traps...freedom**. Salvation, then, just may be more about what happens to us in this life than what does in the next. And the salvation that comes to Zacchaeus' life, not in the future but right now, is restoration, the restoring of his right relationship within his community.

Amazingly, salvation, at least according to this story, does not require or result in perfection. Salvation in this lifetime is not about an idealistic end state. Salvation is *the process*, the process that God works within us. Salvation is the moment to moment healing and reconciling that is needed for creating right relationships within which compromised, impure, and sinful people—like us—can live within, in response to, and toward, the realm of God.

Well, we may not be the head of Revenue Canada today, or do the kinds of jobs that would make us truly distrusted and despised, as Zacchaeus did. Yet there are a few other ways we can sympathize with him, aren't there? For even if we don't feel wealthy, we also know, when we take a moment to think about the global economic system, how rich we really are. Like Zacchaeus, we know what it is to work hard for what we earn and yet sometimes, feel uncomfortable or even guilty when we compare our wealth to others in most other parts of the world. Like him, we know that we are caught, captive within an economic system that privileges us, here in North America, at the expense of the rest of the world. Like him, some of us do jobs that actually *are* unpopular.

And yet, like Zacchaeus, we are also trying to be faithful, even in the midst of our complicity and imperfection. We are committed to tithing, to giving a certain percentage of our income to the work of the Christian community, and to give more to outside charities and organizations, because it is a life-giving practice of our faith. We may wonder if it's enough, even as we feel barraged by so much need, but like Zacchaeus, we are mostly good people, mostly faithful people, trying to do our best and be the most generous people we can, most of the time.

So maybe the good news for us, as it was for Zacchaeus, is that our salvation is not a once and for all deal that requires an extraordinary and once in a lifetime sacrifice. Maybe our salvation, our healing, our wholeness, is a process that God has already begun, that is already underway, within us. That is worked out in and through us, through the daily decisions that we make in our work place, and our school, and our community centre, and at home, decisions that bring us into closer and right relationships with ourselves, and each other, and God.

The good news for us is that, no matter how imperfect we are, no matter how hard it is for us to be faithful in the midst of lives that seem so captive to economic forces beyond our control, when we seek out Jesus, when we yearn for a glimpse of him, he sees us as well. Jesus sees us, like Zacchaeus, as daughters and sons of God, members of the beloved community, and proclaims that even in the midst of our ordinary, complicated, complicit, struggling-to-be-faithful lives, salvation has come.

Thanks be to God!

resources: David Ewart, www.holytextures.com; www.workingpreacher.org