

Jesus, Still Friend of Sinners

Luke 19:1-10

READ Luke 19:1-10

There is a lot of stuff going on in this story.

When I really heard, really listened to “Jesus, Friend of Sinners” a few months ago, this is the passage of Scripture that I heard the song pointing to. And as I spent more and more time in the Gospel of Luke, I kept hearing it, and then decided that if Luke had a theme song, sort of like a movie theme song, it would have been “Jesus, Friend of Sinners”. We have explored other themes in Luke, for certain, but we keep coming back to this one, and here we are finally at the story of Zacchaeus. We are not done with the theme, but this is like a musical crescendo.

“Jesus, Friend of Sinners” is not the only theme that we find in this story that is repeated or recalled from elsewhere in Luke.

Jesus has told several parables and taught a number of lessons about how hard it is for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. That is not because it is inherently evil to be wealthy, but because the wealthy may find themselves complacent and satisfied with human possessions and stop seeking the greater wealth of the kingdom of God, and because the accumulation of wealth can become a priority taking on greater importance than our relationship with God. Yet here is a story about a really wealthy person in whom those barriers to God are overcome. We see the same things at work to overcome these problems in Zacchaeus that we see overcoming all kinds of barriers to relationship with God – faith and repentance. Zacchaeus himself may not have associated the impulse he felt to climb a tree just to see this Jesus fellow with faith, but at its root, it was faith. God’s grace was working in Zacchaeus before Zacchaeus had any idea what grace was, and it sent him up a tree. His response to that grace was repentance. We find reinforced here again faith and repentance leading to salvation. We’ve seen that before, and we’ll see it again.

As a chief tax collector, Zacchaeus would have been well known, and not in a good way. The Romans contracted out tax collection to local people. Zacchaeus would have paid some amount of money to the Romans for his region, and then taken on the responsibility for collecting the taxes owed from the population. There were all kinds of taxes, so he

would have had other tax collector employees, like, for example, Matthew, who was basically a toll booth operator working for somebody like Zacchaeus. Anything they collected above what the chief tax collector had paid the Romans would have been profit to the chief tax collector. It was a system in which the opportunity for fraud, corruption, and dishonest dealing would have been rampant. That didn't matter to the Romans as long as they got what they assessed.

So everybody in Jericho knew Zacchaeus. As the crowd gathered along the streets when Jesus and the disciples approached, some of them might have been tempted to throw an elbow his way, or sort of accidentally step on his foot. Kind of like what might happen at the bottom of a pile in a football game. Zacchaeus had a social position there, even if it was not a popular one, and that social position would not be one in which climbing a tree would be thought of as particularly dignified. Reminds me of the story of King David dancing in the street before the Ark of the Covenant, much to his wife's embarrassment. David's response to her was something like "I'm dancing in the joy of the Lord, and will be even more undignified than this for that purpose." Zacchaeus had to see Jesus, and the indignity of a man like him climbing a tree just didn't matter. The crowd created two different barriers for Zacchaeus: the physical barrier that simply kept him from seeing, and the social barrier that labeled him as an outcast. His height and his occupation were not the defining characteristics of Zacchaeus, but those were the boxes that the people had put him in.

Jesus did not care about the boxes. None of the characteristics that we use to categorize people mean a thing to God. That does not stop us from categorizing people based on their skin color, politics, sexual orientation, occupation, gender, economic status, national origin, denomination... that list could go on for a while, and none of the categories that we would put on the list would matter to God. What matters to God is what is in the heart of a person, and only God can see in there. Jesus broke down the walls that were built up around Zacchaeus by his own actions and by the society around him, and restored Zacchaeus to the place that God had made him for as a child of Abraham, a child of God.

Jesus has told us other parables about lost things: lost sheep, lost coins, lost people... and at the end of this passage about His encounter with Zacchaeus, we are clearly reminded that recovering the lost was at the heart of the entire ministry of Jesus. "Lost" here does not

mean doomed – it means lost in the simplest sense of the word: not in the place where it should be. God is all about getting us from wherever we are to where we should be, and where we should be is in the right and perfect and intimate relationship with God that God made us for from the beginning.

I don't want us to miss two more important things about this story. Jesus is not just wandering through Jericho. He is on His way to Jerusalem, where He knows – and nobody else has realized – that everything will be fulfilled that He has been telling them. He will be arrested and crucified and raised from the dead. He has been on His way to that dramatic climax of His earthly ministry since Luke told us in chapter 9 that Jesus set His face resolutely for Jerusalem. This was incredibly important stuff about to happen – but not more important than spotting little Zacchaeus in a tree straining for a glimpse of the Savior. In the mind and heart of God, we all have God's highest attention and priority. All of us and each of us matter just the same to God in a way that we cannot understand or duplicate in human terms. God has an infinite amount of time available for every one of us. Even the sinners. Even the outcasts.

And we must not miss this. The story of Zacchaeus, the story of Jesus, friend of sinners, is not just about Jesus personally loving all those people into relationship with Him. It is also about us seeing there the model and example for how we are to love people into relationship with God. We are that sinner. We are that outcast. But as children of God, we are instruments of God's grace, giving Zacchaeus a boost up into the tree so he could see, helping him prepare the meal for his friends, seeing past and through and over the barriers that separated him, being his friend in the most meaningful sense of the word. Jesus came to seek and to save and to claim us as His disciples, disciples who join into the life and proclamation of the Gospel. Jesus, friend of sinners, means for each of us to claim that place and that life of faith and repentance and intimacy with Almighty God. God invites you to that place and to that life, now and forever. Come down out of that tree, and join God at the table of grace.

Amen.