

Isaiah 1:10-18  
Psalm 31:1-7  
2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12  
Luke 19:1-10

Proper 26 C  
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island  
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### Our Lavishly Loving God

For those of you who read along rather than simply listen to the gospel proclamation, you likely noticed the words deacon Dan proclaimed were not the same as the words in your bulletin. Your bulletin contains the NRSV translation, the translation we most often hear in church. But scholars disagree about the verb tense in the Greek translations, and the difference in those translations changes the story pretty dramatically. We'll get to that, but for those of you who pay perfect attention, I just want to acknowledge the difference between the NRSV version that's printed in your bulletin and the version you heard proclaimed this morning, so you can listen to the rest of the sermon and not have to be wondering about that. And those of you who did notice the difference? Perhaps you'd like to volunteer to edit for us!

There is so much of this gospel passage that harkens back to the stories Luke has been telling these many weeks. Do you remember the stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin? The shepherd who left 99 of his sheep and went looking for the one who was lost. And a woman who stayed up all night long, turning the house inside out until she found her one lost coin. These are stories of the extravagant love of a God who would go to any length to find Zacchaeus, or to find us.

And then there was that very confusing story about the rich man who praised his dishonest manager, when the manager cheated him by not collecting enough goods from the tenant farmers. That manager turned his allegiance from the rich to the poor, and while you might not see it on the surface, I believe Zacchaeus did the same... but we'll get to that later too.

And then there was another rich ruler, the one who ignored Lazarus all his life and in the end, wanted Lazarus to save him. And the story of faith the size of a mustard seed, faith that seems so ordinary and small, but with God's help, faith that changes the world. And just last week, two men went up to the temple to pray, one a tax collector and another, a Pharisee. Evil rich rulers, terrible tax collectors, dishonest managers – all of these shady characters live in our imaginations as we hear this story of Zacchaeus, a rich man who was the chief tax collector who ruled over all others. Because we've heard all those stories, we think we know everything we need to know about Zacchaeus. But just as with many of the stories we've heard these past few weeks, what's happening on the surface is nothing compared to what lies beneath. We're inclined to leap to the interpretation that being rich is bad – after all, doesn't Jesus always criticize the rich? And that tax collectors are the worst of the worst – after all, didn't they collude with the occupying government and ruin the lives of their own people? We think we see Zacchaeus for what he really is, and what we see is a bad guy. A rich lying, cheating, unethical little man who makes his money off the backs of his own people.

But listen again. Jesus 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... But how can it be that a bad guy rich tax collector goes seeking Jesus? Well, that's what happens in God's upside down world. Just when we think we know who the good guys and the bad guys are, the rug gets yanked out from under us. Just like all the stories that came before, the story of Zacchaeus is the story of a God of surprises, a God that sees all of us, everybody from rich, chief tax collectors to you and me, as holy and whole.

This story, like so many of the stories Jesus tells, give me ample opportunity to look at all the assumptions I make, and how those assumptions can really get in the way of seeing the many ways God redeems people and things, the many ways God's kingdom is already here among us. I assume I know this story – after all, I've heard it since I was a child. There once was a rich little man who desperately wanted to see Jesus, but the crowds were in his way. Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus so badly that he ran ahead and climbed a tree so he could see. Jesus passed under the tree, looked up at Zacchaeus and told him to hurry down and bring Jesus to his house. Zacchaeus scrambled down the tree, utterly delighted at the prospect bringing Jesus home with him. The crowds were enraged that Jesus would be the guest of such a sinner, but short of stature **Zacchaeus** stood tall and came to his own defense, saying "Look, Lord, I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone, I repay them four times as much." And Jesus proclaimed him a descendant of Abraham, one who had been saved. Pretty simple, right?

Maybe. But maybe not. When, I wonder was the last time I wanted so desperately to see Jesus that I would go to such ridiculous lengths to find him? Oh I know I can count on Jesus to come seeking me, and mostly I rely on that. But Zacchaeus reminds me of my deep-down, sometimes forgotten or pushed aside longing for God, and he reminds me to let that longing rise up in me. Jesus told him to hurry – can you imagine? Hurry down Kathy, hurry down Judith, hurry down Brian, hurry down David, HURRY! Hurry, we have things to do together, come quickly so we can be about the business of being together. How hard is it for us to believe God so deeply desires to be with us that God can't wait? Do I ever feel like I can't wait?

Zacchaeus responded to Jesus' request by scrambling down the tree, filled with delight at the prospect of bringing Jesus home with him. I wonder if he remembered he'd left the breakfast dishes on the counter in his haste to see Jesus or that his laundry was on the bathroom floor. I wonder how filled with delight I would be to welcome Jesus into my less-than-perfectly-tidy world? I wonder how often I try to clean things up, get things right, get myself in order before I let Jesus come calling. Every Sunday we acknowledge that God knows all our secrets...almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known and from you no secrets are hid... and still, we sometimes think we need to be who or how we are not in order to stand in God's presence. But it isn't so. Zacchaeus reminds us that we can simply delight in God's desire to be with us, that we can delight in our desire to be with God, no matter what anybody says.

And the crowds had plenty to say. “You’re not worthy, Zacchaeus; why would God want to pay any attention to you, Zacchaeus?; who do you think you are, Zacchaeus?” Sometimes the crowds are outside ourselves, but often they are within. How often do I remind myself that I am not good enough or smart enough or holy enough to be worthy of God’s attention? But Zacchaeus doesn’t listen to the crowds. When they start to grumble and say all the reasons Jesus shouldn’t be paying attention to him, Zacchaeus looks Jesus square in the face and says “It isn’t so. I give away half of what I make to poor people and if I cheat anyone, I repay them four times as much.”

I told you earlier that scholars interpret Zacchaeus’ words differently and the difference in interpretation really changes things. Don’t look now, but your bulletin has Zacchaeus speaking in the future tense... “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.” It’s what some scholars call the “future present tense.” But strangely enough, this “future present tense” doesn’t show up anywhere else in the Bible. So what does that mean? Well, it might mean that the “future present tense” is a convenient way to make the story say what we want it to say. It might mean we’ll go to any lengths to preserve our way of seeing the world. It might mean it’s so impossible for us to see that a rich man could enter into a corrupt system to do good from within. It might mean Zacchaeus chose to be a tax collector precisely because he didn’t need the poor people’s money, that in fact he wanted to help them keep the money that was theirs. And that he wanted to give them more money, besides.

But we insist on seeing what we “know” to be true. That short, rich tax collectors are in need of repentance. Lord I will give to the poor, I will repay, I will repent. It makes for a good conversion story, but I don’t think Zacchaeus was in need of conversion. I think he was already a son of Abraham. I think he was already saved.

Just like the dishonest manager who forgave the debts of the tenant farmers, just like Jesus, Zacchaeus aligned himself with the poor. Yes, he was part of an oppressive system, but by not overcharging or cheating or buying into the cultural norms, Zacchaeus was on the side of the poor. It’s complicated, isn’t it? Yet all throughout Luke’s gospel, Jesus shows us that all our big opinions, all our black and white pronouncements, all our judgments and certainties are really best left behind. Life is complicated and our job is to open our minds and hearts so we can begin to see with a God’s eye view.

What I am finding week after week as I study these scriptures is that while the parables - and likely all of the gospels - show us things about ourselves, they are really all about the nature of our lavishly loving God. And if we look at today’s story as a story about God, it doesn’t really matter whether Zacchaeus had a conversion because of Jesus welcoming him fully and publicly into the kingdom, or whether he’d been living into kingdom values all along. What matters is that God loves us, that God sees us holy and whole and that God wants nothing more than just to come home with us. Amen