

SEEN AND FORGIVEN
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The Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 26)
October 30, 2022

With this morning's Gospel story, we find Jesus moving closer to Jerusalem and the final act of his mission on earth. Along the journey through Galilee and Samaria, Jesus has met, healed, and engaged with many lost and not so lost souls. Let's look at this morning's surprising story.

Today we have the story of the chief tax collector, Zacchaeus. We're told he's a man of short stature and certainly a very rich and important man. We usually don't hear this lesson as it is often replaced with the All Saints' readings transferred from November 1. Sunday school children hear it a lot because it's one that resonates with our smaller humans. Here we have the story of a very powerful man who by no fault of his own is small. (I for one know what it's like to be small. Crowds are overwhelming. I often can't see what's going on ahead of me.) But Zacchaeus is not just short and powerful, he's smart and determined. And he is strong! He climbs a tree to get a view of this man called Jesus that the crowd is surrounding!

Of course, if you go to Israel, your tour through Jericho will certainly take you to the tree that is purported to be the one Zacchaeus climbed to see Jesus. It's not a very impressive tree set in a corner park. I could have done without seeing it! I prefer my own image of a grand tree with many impressive limbs, but either way – he climbed a tree!

Zacchaeus is a very wealthy man. He is not beloved of the crowds he takes advantage of by collecting taxes for the Romans. He might even have been seen as a traitor siding with the Romans. But here he is a central figure on Jesus's road to Jerusalem. He is not a blind beggar, a widow, or a leper like those who have figured recently in our Gospel narratives. So why Zacchaeus?

Think about how very extraordinary it is for this uber-wealthy man to climb a tree to see Jesus. Zacchaeus did not know he needed Jesus the way the others did. But his soul knew. He climbs the tree because something led him to. He needed to be seen by Jesus.

What happens next is equally astonishing. In the midst of the crowd, Jesus sees Zacchaeus in the tree. And what does Jesus do? He tells Zacchaeus to hurry down from the tree and invites himself to stay at the man's house! Jesus has accepted Zacchaeus before Zacchaeus even says a thing! I used a very small word a few seconds ago. Sees. Jesus sees Zacchaeus. What does it mean to be seen by Jesus? Would Jesus have seen Zacchaeus if he hadn't run on ahead and climbed that tree? Probably not. Remember he was a short man. He would have been lost in the crowd. But Zacchaeus made that bold move and winds up with a dinner guest! (I wonder what Zacchaeus's wife thought of this unexpected company!) But we hear the crowd grumbled and called Zacchaeus a sinner. Remember he collected taxes from them for Rome. Not a popular job.

But what happens when Jesus invites himself to Zacchaeus's home? Zacchaeus immediately repents of his sinful behavior within seconds. He then commits to giving to the poor and repaying anyone he defrauded four times as much!

What's amazing to me is the order in which these things take place. It's not a surprise that the encounter with Jesus would have this impact. It's that Jesus sees and accepts Zacchaeus before the proclamation from Zacchaeus!

In our liturgy, we put confession first and absolution afterwards. We have spent many years doing this week after week on Sundays. We cannot help but get the impression that first we have to repent and then we get forgiveness as a reward for repenting. But on this day, we have to point out that God actually does this thing backwards. With God, forgiveness and acceptance is there before we repent. And this is always and everywhere our chief reason for thanksgiving, be it the eucharistic Great Thanksgiving or tiny prayers of gratitude in the course of daily life. No character in the

Gospel stories exemplifies this more than Zacchaeus. The abundant love that God bears towards the ungodly while they are still in the squalor of their ungodliness. Even just sitting in a tree to get a better view.

Our opening hymn this morning chosen by our own beloved Carolyn, “There is a wideness in God’s mercy,” and that mercy is there for all of us even before we acknowledge our own sinfulness. The hymn goes on to say:

There’s a kindness in his justice, which is more than liberty.
There is welcome for the sinner and more graces for the good.
For the love of god is broader than the measure of the mind;
And the heart of the eternal is most wonderfully kind.
If our love were but more faithful, we should take him at his word;
And our life would be thanksgiving for the goodness of the lord.

If we are committed to showing this kind of love—not only on our lips but in our lives, as the General Thanksgiving in Morning Prayer puts it—then the proper response to a child who has just broken the precious vase on the mantelpiece is to hug them first, and give the punishment later. The right way to show God’s kind of love and forgiveness to anyone who cheats might be to send them flowers.

And if we let our imaginations go along that trajectory, we soon realize that the love and forgiveness of God surpass anything we can come up with ourselves. This kind of love extends to the abuser, the liar, the thief, the cheat, and the killer, in circumstances that often produce too much human damage and hurt for us to begin to forgive until we see signs of repentance. But that is God’s work. And ours to strive for. It’s the work of visiting the prisoner, not to absolve them of their sin but to share the love of God with them.

So, we pause here and spend a few minutes in the tree with Zacchaeus before following Jesus to his final days in Jerusalem. This is why we need the story of Zacchaeus. To see that God’s love is for all of us. God accepts and transforms the unacceptable, loves the un-loveable, forgives the unforgivable. Soon we will walk those final days with Jesus. But for now, we can stay with this mornings’ Psalm 32 where it says, “Happy are those whose transgressions are forgiven and whose sin is put away!” ... And “Therefore all the faithful will make their prayers to you in time of trouble.”

This morning my prayer for all of us would be to climb that tree with Zacchaeus and be seen by Jesus! Truly seen,,and forgiven.