

Luke 19:1–10 (NRSV)

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief toll 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 give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I 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.”

Today

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: November 3, 2013 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Luke 19:1-10

It was always unfair. It was unfair the way they hated me. Zacchaeus, they jeered. You have a good Hebrew name. Your family has lived in this Jordan River valley from time before memory. Your mother named you Zacchaeus, the pure one, the righteous one. Look at you now. You work for the Romans. You are the chief toll collector. Every Judean who travels this highway pays you for the privilege, the privilege of travelling our own roads, our own trade routes. We pay a temple tax, a head tax, a land tax, and a road toll tax. We are crushed under this burden, but you, Zacchaeus, even your name betrays your offense, you who are named pure and righteous, are rich at our expense. What an embarrassment you are.

They were right, of course. There's something unsavory about a man who lives off the flesh of his own people. I didn't mean for it end up that way, if that's any consolation. A man seldom sees the future, or maybe it would better said a man seldom looks to see where the small step added to the small step finally leads.

I had a family to feed. A little extra cash helping with the tolls wasn't that big a thing. It would be just for a little while, until I got back on my feet. And anyway, Rome was going to get the toll one way or another. Somebody was going to collect it. If I didn't, somebody would. Yes, I agreed to collect tolls, just as a fill-in, just temporarily. I told my wife, the only difference it makes for me to collect a few tolls is that we get to eat. Nobody pays more because I collect the tolls. She tried to force a smile, but we both hated what we were doing. But we were at end of our rope.

Well that was a long time ago, and a lot has happened since. But it didn't happen exactly how you may think it did. It certainly didn't happen the way our neighbors thought it did. Oh, how they hated me.

Truth is, I was one hundred percent honest, one hundred percent. Toll collectors were known for cooking the books, as you would say it. They would collect a little more than they were supposed to. Then they would report a little less than they were supposed to. It was called the triple play. They cheated the people a little, they cheated the Romans a little, and they drew a salary, three sources of income in one toll. In the end nobody trusted the toll collectors, even the Romans. Everyone agreed we were a rotten lot.

But I was different. I told my wife, If I'm going to do this job, at least I'm not going to swindle anyone. I was unprepared for what that led to, though. The people still hated me. Fair enough. I took their money; although they could have noticed, I was taking less than others. They could have given me a little credit. I never defrauded them. But it's probably too much to ask that a person give you credit for taking less than you could have. I was still taking more than they could afford.

But my boss liked me a lot. He always got the full collection from me. I didn't skim anything off the top. He began to notice that he always got more money on my shift than on any other. Well one thing led to another. Pretty soon I was working full time. My salary went up. My boss started giving me the best shifts. I did the job with fairness. My income and my stature

grew. And I kept telling myself that it was still temporary, until I got back on my feet. But I knew I was kidding myself. By then I was already better off than almost everybody in town, but I didn't quit.

One morning the soldiers showed up at my house. I'll be honest with you, I was scared to death. I hadn't done anything wrong, but Rome didn't spend a lot of money trying to be sure people were innocent. Enough people hated me. Who knew what I had been accused of?

The Centurion said, Zacchaeus, you need to come with us. My wife was shaking, and I tried not to show my fear for her sake. The soldiers hurried me along the streets of the town, out of the neighborhood to the northern courtyard of Herod's winter palace. [slide 1] It would be an understatement to say that the palace was imposing. It nearly dwarfed the city itself. If you were a Judean, going there under armed guard was about the worst thing you could imagine.

I was taken into a small chamber. Herod's head taxation man was there. He dismissed all but one of the soldiers. I could not read his face. Zacchaeus, he said, Do you know why I brought you here? With as much confidence as I could muster, I said, No, sir, I do not know why you brought me here. Zacchaeus, do you know why I brought you here under armed guard. No sir, I don't know that either.

Well, Zacchaeus, let's begin with the latter. I brought you here under armed guard because I wanted you to know without a single doubt that Herod is in charge here in Judea, and we can take you out of your house anytime, day or night, and detain you. Yes sir, I understand that. Rome and her governors are all powerful. I have never said otherwise.

No you haven't, Zacchaeus. You have been very loyal. And in fact, that's why you are here. Taxes, Zacchaeus. Taxes. They make the world go around. They make the empire run. They build the roads. They pay the army. They built this glorious palace. But taxes tempt a man, too, Zacchaeus, especially a man who collects the taxes. Skim a little here, a little there, and pretty soon you're a rich man. I believe you are a rich man, are you not, Zacchaeus?

I began to quiver. Sir, I have never skimmed the taxes, honest, I swear. I swear.

Well that's what I thought, Zacchaeus. But we wanted one more test, just to be sure. We have our ways of hearing things, you know, Zacchaeus. And we heard that you were a loyal and honest man who has never cheated the emperor. That's why you are here. Now I am convinced that you are an honest man.

It turns out we can't say the same of your predecessor, Zacchaeus. I say predecessor, because today you are the chief toll collector. I will not bore you with what has become of your predecessor. Suffice it to say, it is not pleasant.

But Zacchaeus, we believe you're just the man for the job. We know that you will keep the toll collectors honest, and we know that you will pass on to the governor his full due. Just remember this Zacchaeus. There's an old saying, Do your job well and you'll be well off. Cheat the governor and your head will be well off.

The tax official then dismissed me. As I left the chamber I heard him say behind me, Congratulations on your new post.

So, that's me. That's how I became Zacchaeus, the chief toll collector. There was a lesson there. Play by Rome's rules and you just might live, maybe even thrive. Deviate from Rome's rules and the price was high. I was an honest man who played by Rome's rules, so I returned home that day a man with his head still attached and a promotion. My wife and I held each other and wept. We wept because I had come home. Both of us had feared I wouldn't. But we wept for other reasons, too. I had become a toll collector, not a part-time temporary one, but a full-time one, a good one, and now I had just been promoted to chief. This is who I had become.

I could no longer pretend it wasn't. I'm not sure we could have put words to it, but my wife and I wept for what I had become.

But I was stuck. There seemed no other way to turn. I was as honest as I could be. I did no more to my neighbors than Rome required. What was I supposed to do? Quit and live in poverty? Or should I become a zealot? That was futile. You might annoy Rome like a bothersome fly, but in the end you were sure to get swatted. And to be honest, I was doing just fine with Rome.

About this time I began to hear stories about a man they called Jesus of Nazareth, up in the Galilee. It seemed that every caravan that came through my toll gates in Jericho was buzzing about this Galilean who was teaching in the open air. They said huge crowds came out wherever he began to speak: on mounts, in the fields and meadows, by the seashore. The way they told it huge crowds pressed in to hear him so that sometimes he had to go into a boat or go off into the wilderness to get away.

I heard many of the stories he told. One in particular stuck in my mind. You can probably guess which one. One day someone asked him if you should pay taxes to Caesar. It was a trap. Say no and it was sedition against the emperor. The zealot would say no. Say yes, and the people would hate you as an arm of Rome. A toll collector like me would have to say yes. How could I say anything else? But then, like a knife blade, the story cut to the heart of my self-deception. Give unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's. That's what he said. He didn't say don't pay the tax. But what he did say that a man's loyalty to God is what counts. He struck at the heart of my shame.

I was an honest man. I defrauded no one, neither Judean nor Roman. I could tell him that with a clean conscience. That was my name—Zacchaeus, clean, righteous. But at the center of my uneasiness lay a question. What must one render unto God to be truly righteous? I was very good at rendering unto Caesar, and I did it about as fairly as anyone could, but God seemed to want something else, something more from me.

Then one day word spread that he was coming down the Jordan valley on his way up to Jerusalem. [slide 2] As he arrived in Jericho, a throng moved with him. I climbed a sycamore tree to get out of the way and to see him better. When he came pretty close, I could see him plainly. Our eyes met. Suddenly, it was as though he was seeing into my inmost parts. Then I heard him call my name. How he knew who I was? He said, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today."

Today. I must have heard the rest of what he was saying. I went home, and we prepared a meal for him. But the only thing my mind could process was today, today, today. The job was going to be temporary, but when would I actually leave. Today, today, today. Something was drawing me, and it wouldn't accept wait a minute. It drummed, today, today, today. Weakly I pushed back, but I'm a good man, I said. But it beat on, today, today, today.

At dinner I thought my head would explode, and I blurted out, Today, what? He looked at me again with that look that seemed to see through me. Softly he said. Where your treasure is, there will be your heart also. Where is your treasure Zacchaeus? Where is your heart?

There are times, Zacchaeus, when the heart knows itself, when it beats in tune with mind of God. But people put the heart off. They tell it to wait a little while, maybe until they get on their feet. And slowly the heart loses its suppleness. Treasures build up, and they stiffen the heart. Treasure guides the heart. Zacchaeus, it has to go the other way around. Let your heart settle into the mind of God, and then follow it, follow it today.

A long time ago, Zacchaeus, you began collecting tolls for the empire so you could get through a rough spot. That was not your failure. Your heart broke for your hungry family and you collected tolls so you could feed them. But then what? You didn't like the idea of the job, but every day it became easier. You became wealthy. You said to yourself that it would be alright because you were honest and defrauded no one. But what of your heart Zacchaeus? Did not your wealth subdue the aching in your heart? That's the mistake we make, Zacchaeus. We think the heart isn't supposed to ache. But today, Zacchaeus, you climbed a sycamore tree, for your heart yearned to break once more in love. Your heart yearned to ache for the transcendence of God, to ache again for your family, to ache for your neighbor and to ache for Judea. Embrace that aching heart today, Zacchaeus. Let your aching heart point to where the real treasures are, the things worth loving. Today. Not tomorrow, but today. Otherwise tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow, and the next day, the aching heart will little by little recede to the old acceptable way, where the heart does not ache, and neither does it beat Today, Zacchaeus, Today. Amen.