

A Grown up Zacchaeus

Menno Mennonite Church

July 23, 2023

Purpose: To proclaim the expansion of the Gospel of Salvation as a corporate event, not just an individual.

Message: We, like Zacchaeus are called to act in the cause of the kingdom's salvation, extended reconciliation to all those around us.

Scripture: Luke 19:1-10 (I will read), Psalm 113, Acts 2:37-47 (2 others suggested, but not necessary).

Synopsis: We are not comfortable with the idea of salvation. It militates against the rationality of our modern concepts, and it has come to mean quite often a sense of a claim bought by a select few who have made the right intellectual assent to gain the keys to the here after for us and ours only. Here, in the story of Zacchaeus, we have a story of salvation that is about far more than just one individual getting it right. Zacchaeus, a person on the periphery of society is reached out to by Jesus and granted salvation not by intellectual assent, but by being held up as a model of one who is doing that which the Lord requires. This is a salvation that is not just for the individual but is communal in its impact, granting peace to the whole house of the one who has turned.

Luke 19:1-27 ^{NRS} **Luke 19:1** He entered Jericho and was passing through it. ² A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³ He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. ⁵ 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." ⁶ So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. ⁷ All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." ⁸ 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." ⁹ Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Luke 19:1-10, Bryce's loose translation (BLT)

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² And look: A man was there named Zacchaeus;
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"Today salvation has come to this house,
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¹⁰ For the Son of Man came
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the ones who are being destroyed."

Zacchaeus is not one of our spiritual heroes. If you are like me it has been quite some time since I thought of this incident, let alone spent time thinking it through or applying it to our lives. my most salient memories and encounters with the short man of Jericho are not in the quieted halls of academia, or the all too serious conversations that mark the formal disciplines of theology but the days of the fuzzy felt board in Sunday School. Basically we have the cast and characters as extras to Jesus' mission to seek and to save, the ones that encounter the extraordinary persona of Jesus and are never the same again. We don't know much of them, and Zacchaeus does better than most. After all he has his own song, though it dissolves into "Old King Cole" pretty quickly. I can't miss the opportunity to take you down memory lane a little bit here. *[play Zacchaeus was a wee little man]*

Whether this transports you back to the days of half height Sunday School chairs, or if this is the first time that you have heard this ditty, the message is clear; Zacchaeus was a tiny person, a sinner, working and walking on the side of things, just wanting to see this man from Nazareth. The point is that person is changed and is different than what he had been and that is good. Zacchaeus becomes the example of a changed person in coming out of his encounter of with the new Christ offering a spiritual reconciliation through an individualized, and individualistic gospel, but is generally not brought into consideration for people after about the age of 8. Bring the outsiders from the outside into the warmth of God's embrace. As good as the be-like-Zacchaeus and find the best way to seek the savior message is, it does make for a rather short sort of message. Turn from what you have been and sin no more—end of sermon; let's go home.

You no doubt suspect, the sermon is far from over, and I am just getting warmed up. Sorry about that. This translation of this story, and a good and important one at that. But it is not the only one. There are more possible translations, and more possible meanings to this story than what is often found within the confined constraints we usually place Zacchaeus within. If you were reading the scripture along with me, or simply know this story by heart and listening closely to the way that I read it, you might have an idea of the alternate translation that I am going to offer here; I changed some important words in my translation that I read from what is generally found in most Bibles on purpose. And it raises the question: What if Zacchaeus, this chief tax collector among the people, this small man with a bad reputation not only as a sinner, but also not even considered a Jew virtue of his work with the Romans in Jericho—what if this

person, of all people was being noticed by Jesus not just as a potential recipient saving grace and a good meal, but as an example of a person living out the kingdom values that Jesus was espousing? What if Zacchaeus is being held up as an example of the new way of the upside down kingdom, and not just as a person in need of salvation? What if we allow Zacchaeus to grow up a bit here for us?

I need to start here: there is precedent here. I am not arriving at this proposal by sheer wonderment and suggestion and forgetting to back it up. There is actually some fairly good reasoning to suggest something else might be going on here. And it comes down to the translation. Most of the time we think of translation as a fairly algebraic sort of thing. Words are substituted between one language and the next with a one to one equation as we might expect a variable to represent a number. When we are offered $X + 2 = 5$ we know quite easily that X has to be 3. But language is language, and is not nearly so precise, and ancient languages even more so because there are centuries of shift and sand between point A and point B. Translating the meaning of something has a lot to do with form and context, making the search for translation more akin the to trying on of clothes to see what fits the scenario, fit and finish then necessarily being the automatic equivalent to be found. Through in there the ways that verbs and grammar works within languages and you have a much more involved process that can yield several reasonable and supported results from the same phrase that needs to be considered when selecting the best sense of what was being said.

This is what of these such cases. Without going too far into the academic weeds, the way that the Zacchaeus story is told has a fair amount of wiggle possible within the translation with being offered. The interview of Zacchaeus at the table shows a lot of promise. Mostly we report this as Zacchaeus declaring what he will do in light of the grace he has then encountered: I will give four times more than what I have taken; half of my possessions I will give to the poor. These are the signs of a changed individual. But you need to also know that the verb form in Greek allows both for the future tense and the present progressive sense in the same form. So this is the difference between I will travel to China and I am traveling to China. Two trips but very different experiences being spoken to.

In this case that changes a great deal as Zacchaeus reports what he is doing to the Lord: I am giving half of my possessions to the poor and am repaying those who I might have cheated four times over. Instead of being the sinner converted we are given the one seen as sinful who is

in the process of redemption already, someone being held not as an object of transformation but the example of the kingdom that Jesus was preaching in the place it is not being looked for at all. Oh yes; by the way, the name Zacchaeus translates roughly into “pure, innocent, righteous.” Could Luke be using a literary sleight of hand to hint at the overall implications of the story, that Zacchaeus was more than just a sinner saved? Perhaps. The point here is not to make one way the dominate reading versus the other, but to enrich the way that we read to find a broader view on that which we are given to know of God’s saving love, which always has a way of surprising us.

Because look at what this example of salvation and impact has for us. Truth be told, salvation is not a concept that we are all that comfortable with. It militates against our modern, North American sensibilities of being the independent, competent exemplary people that we know ourselves to be, and if we find ourselves not to be measuring up to the mark, we will find a way to do the work for ourselves on ourselves to become the people that Jesus demands. We apply salvation as a laundry detergent that washes us, but seldom as the all-encompassing reality that would change our lives. We have made church far more about being a place where we practice our goodness collectively and improve perhaps our methods of self sufficiency and self-reliance than on a place where people come as they are, for who we are to encounter the risen and calling Christ and to be changed along the way by the grace encountered within the love of God. Salvation is a matter of personal status and personal identity and seldom bleeds over into the broader, social sphere. Where it does it is far more likely to be a matter of self-identification and belonging to a new crowd of people than to have the sense of salvation impacting the day-to-day living and practice of one being saved. Like the first hearers of these things, we might struggle to imagine the ways that the ones who have been lost and the one from whom we expect to see the least might be held up to us as models of transformation and change. We might find shocking a sense of salvation that has people writing checks and changing their lives so radically as to no longer be recognized.

The salvation that Jesus is preaching and declaring for Zacchaeus is a salvation that reaches far more than just one wee little man, absolving him of his wee little problems. This is a salvation and a relationship that changes the world, changes the way that people are called to relate to one another, that changes the way and the being of a community in every way conceivable. This is a salvation that changes the very definitions of life, from who is in and who

is out of the kingdom, on down to the very important question of how we share the resources that we have been given within our communities, within our world. This is a salvation that is about more than just intellectual acceptance of dogma and creed but calls us to walk in that salvation and be about the work of the kingdom coming. This is a salvation that saves more than individual souls, but whole communities, whole structures, whole houses as well; a salvation that calls us to act in, for, and through the love of God to a world so desperately in need of this type of radical salvation that holds no persons as irredeemable, that sees no situation as without hope, that challenges us each and everyday to live into that which God is doing around us as the Kingdom continues to be revealed. This is the type of salvation that I claim, and that I want to share with all those around me.

When we allow Zacchaeus to grow beyond a pleasant story in a pleasant book, we can see the challenges and the call that this story has for us as well; a call to reach beyond the acceptable boundaries and include everyone in the salvation of a community. We are called like Zacchaeus down from our trees, down from our protective hiding spots, to come and walk with Jesus, to be part of the saving, igniting, Kingdom building agenda of the Rabbi of Galilee. The question is, for each of us everyday is will we come and host the Lord, showing the work of the kingdom in our lives and our living.

It is a challenge, but it is one worth taking. May we hear with fresh ears, always, that which God is saying to us as the ones being saved. And may that salvation resonate through our lives, young or old, and being part of the promise of the kingdom coming. Amen.