

**April 6, 2025**  
**Luke 19:1-10**  
**Rev. Kelley Becker**

The art on the screen is called Lost & Found. We discussed this piece on Wednesday at the Common Ground service. The artist is Lisle Gwynn Garrity, and she created it in response to last week's text, Luke 15:1-7, the Parable of the Lost Sheep. You can see that the artist has drawn the shepherd with the found sheep draped safely over his shoulder.

I had a weird experience with this image this week, and I think it's worth sharing because it connects nicely to today's text. Have you ever glanced at something quickly and thought you saw something only to find out later that you didn't see what you thought you saw? That's what happened to me with this image. Monday morning, I emailed the digital file for the artwork to Chris so he could include it in Wednesday's slideshow. I glanced at it as I attached the file and, for some reason, in that initial glance, I saw a wolf instead of a sheep resting on the shepherd's shoulders.

So, for about three days, my brain worked to make sense of this image assuming the animal was a wolf. By the time Wednesday afternoon rolled around, when I read the artist's statement and studied the picture thoroughly, I had written a complete theological treatise, in my head, that made the wolf make sense. I worked so hard to make it make sense that I was disappointed when I realized it was a sheep after all.

Stay with me on this for a minute. The author of Luke tells us that Jesus told the story of the Lost Sheep in response to the righteous disapproval of the Pharisees and scribes over his habit of eating with a group of people Luke describes as "tax collectors and sinners." The author uses that phrase to describe people who had broken relationship with the people closest to them. The "tax collectors and sinners," according to scholars Amy Jill Levine and Ben Witherington III, were not outcasts, like the Samaritans would have been, these were insiders, part of the Jewish community, who had "violated the welfare of family and community and thus walked out of home and community."<sup>1</sup>

For example, tax collectors, who were Jewish, collected money from the Jewish people to pay taxes owed to the Empire. These tax collectors, because this was how they made their living, collected more than Rome was owed so they would have plenty of money left for themselves. They took advantage of their own people which cost them community and belonging. The rest of the Jewish community saw the tax collectors collaborating with the ones who had set up the system that oppressed them and they didn't want anything to do with them. They didn't trust them.

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<sup>1</sup> Levine, Amy Hill and Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Luke: New Cambridge Bible Commentary*, (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2018), 410.

Today, the “tax collectors and sinners” would be people like “arms dealers, loan sharks, inside traders, people who collaborate with occupation governments,”<sup>2</sup> and even slum lords. They are people who prey on people in their own communities, who have no problem benefiting from the misery of their neighbors. They are predators, like wolves. Jesus’ habit of eating with these wolves is what prompted the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes. Put in this context, it may be easier for us to understand the position of the Pharisees and scribes. They may have been concerned that Jesus didn’t properly appreciate the harm his table companions had done to their own people.

And that is how I ended up thinking it made sense for the animal in the shepherd’s arms to be a wolf. Clearly, someone who takes advantage of the suffering of others is lost. The story seems even more powerful when the wolf who would have been a danger to the sheep is found and cared for. The wolf also gives a different spin to the last line of the parable, “I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” Luke’s interpretation of this parable makes it clear that Jesus’ concern is repentance and the forgiveness that comes with it, and further, the reintegration into community that comes from true repentance. The wolf turned from his wolfy ways...the wolf was found. And everyone rejoiced!

Alas, it is a sheep in the arms of the shepherd. I think reflecting on the place of the predator the shepherd feared on behalf of the lost sheep sets up this week’s story about a specific predator, a tax collector named Zacchaeus. This is Luke 19:1-10.

19 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.”

Author Rachel Held Evans once said, “What makes the gospel offensive is not who it keeps out, but who it lets in.” In this story, the indignant crowd grumbles when Jesus calls Zacchaeus down from the tree and invites himself to Zacchaeus’ house. Of all the houses in Jericho, he chose the home of the chief tax collector. I think it’s worth noting

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<sup>2</sup> Levine, Amy Hill and Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Luke: New Cambridge Bible Commentary*, (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2018), 410.

that in this story, Jesus' followers are the ones grumbling about Jesus' habit of eating with the wrong people. In last week's story of the lost sheep, it was the Pharisees and scribes grumbling about Jesus' dining companions. Everyone was offended that people like Zacchaeus were acceptable dining companions for Jesus.

Both groups, the Pharisees and scribes, and the crowd see themselves as righteous. I realized this week that the word righteous does not give off a positive vibe to me. I don't know how it sounds to you. It is a good example of church speak...a word churches use and don't really explain, and even though they don't, there is an expectation that Christians will be "righteous." Anyway, as I use the word today, please hear it as neutral. To be righteous is to be "morally right," which all by itself isn't a bad thing.

To the people gathered in Jericho that day and to the author of Luke's original audience, it would have been unbelievable for Jesus to give any positive attention to Zacchaeus. Why would a Jewish teacher like Jesus want to hang out with this unrepentant sinner? I say unrepentant because, at the point Jesus spotted Zacchaeus, all he had done was climb up a tree to get a better look. Before Zacchaeus admitted to anything, promised anything, or agreed to anything, Jesus said, "Hey, let's have dinner at your place." Jesus didn't call him down from the tree to publicly shame him or humiliate him. In a commentary on this text, author and preacher, Rev. Jeff Chu writes, "It's striking that Jesus never called Zacchaeus out...Rather, this seems like the gentlest calling-in." Chu continues, "Faced with Jesus' tender warmth, Zacchaeus descends from the tree, rejoins the people, and immediately pledges restitution---a two-pronged reconciliation with both God and neighbor."<sup>3</sup>

Back to righteousness...as followers of Jesus, if we think anyone in this story was righteous it was Jesus, correct? And here, Jesus didn't meet Zacchaeus with righteous indignation and finger-pointing, he met him with mercy. It is as if Jesus was showing us that part of being righteous is extending mercy, even when it is unpopular. Righteousness does not reject mercy for other people and their mistakes, righteousness embraces it. Righteousness is merciful.

Jesus responded to Zacchaeus' turnabout by proclaiming that salvation had come "to this house." It wasn't only Zacchaeus who was saved, it was his whole family. The Greek word translated here as "salvation" has an element of wholeness attached to it. Jesus made it clear that his proclamation was not about an absolution of individual sin. Zacchaeus and his family were delivered back into the wholeness of community. Zacchaeus' desire to make his neighbors whole by promising restitution brings wholeness to his entire household. You may recall that when I've talked about the word shalom in Hebrew, I've said that it is more than peace (which is how it is translated in English), it is wholeness and one of us cannot be whole until all of us are whole. People, like Zacchaeus and all wolves, who take advantage of other people, no

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<sup>3</sup> Chu, Jeff, commentary on Luke 19:1-10, Sanctified Art, "Everything [in] Between" sermon series.

matter how much wealth they amass or how much power they grab, will never be whole while keeping others from being whole.

Zacchaeus' story ends with Jesus' proclamation, but what do you think their meal together was like? What do you imagine any of Jesus' meals with "the wolves" were like? I've always imagined they were pleasant, even fun. I figured Jesus told some stories and jokes and I assumed the "wolves" were so charmed by his wit and intelligence that they couldn't help but like him and want to be part of what he was doing, even if they didn't really understand it.

But what if it wasn't like that? What if there was radical truth-telling at these tables? What if Jesus used his time at tables to go deeper? Is it possible that when Jesus and Zacchaeus sat down to dinner, Jesus looked at him and said, "So, you know you have to find a different way to make a living, right?" After all, Zacchaeus said nothing when he came down from the tree about quitting his tax collecting job. Was he planning to continue working for Rome? Would that have been okay? Maybe Jesus looked around at Zacchaeus' house and said, "How do you sleep at night knowing you have all of this, and your neighbors have nothing?"

Because of our warm and fuzzy feelings about gathering at a table with everyone, I think we imagine the meals Jesus had with people who disagreed with him were easier than they were. Do we think it was easy for Jesus because he was Jesus or because those were "simpler" times? Do we think it is much more complicated for us today? The gospel authors don't tell us that Jesus was nervous as he walked into Zacchaeus' house, knowing what he needed to say to him. That doesn't mean he wasn't though. They don't tell us how difficult it was for him not to open conversations with "wolves" by saying, "You are selfish and greedy and your collaboration with Rome is disgusting. You are an embarrassment to every Jew." That doesn't mean he didn't think about it though. I bet his internal monologue wasn't that much different from ours.

It occurs to me that there may be some of you who are more comfortable imagining that Jesus wasn't nervous or tempted to say the kinds of things we think. Maybe the Jesus you follow needs to be perfect to give you something to aspire to. If so, that's totally fine. But for me, the stories of Jesus have taken on a deeper meaning as I have imagined that he struggled with the same things I struggle with. The Jesus I follow would have been nervous on Sunday mornings stepping up into the pulpit. The Jesus I follow would have been angry at the tax collectors and it would have been hard for him not to lash out at them. But he would have known that there are times when calling someone in is much more effective than calling someone out. The Jesus I follow would have kept coming to the table time after time because he would have known that otherwise, nothing changes.

I don't think it was any easier for Jesus to sit at the table with people he disagreed with or people he knew were hurting other people by their actions or lack of action

than it is for us. But the gospel stories tell us that he did it anyway. He sat at the table while people justified their perspectives and their actions. He probably argued with them and maybe he pounded on the table. But he kept meeting people where they were and inviting them to the table no matter who they were. And honestly, I think there were probably a lot of those meals he dreaded. I bet he walked away from some meals and looked at Peter and said, "That's three hours I'll never get back." Gathering around any table, including this one, with people who aren't like you, who don't think like you or agree with you, is hard. But we have to meet people somewhere. There might as well be carbs involved.

These days when I think of the word mercy, I think of the Episcopal Bishop of Washington, Mariann Edgar Budde. Bishop Budde became famous 5 years ago amid the outcry and chaos that surrounded George Floyd's murder by a police officer when she spoke truth to power after the President used St. John's Episcopal Church in Washington DC, as a backdrop for a photo op posing with an upside-down Bible. And again, Bishop Budde spoke truth to power at the Inaugural Prayer Service in January of this year when she ended her sermon by speaking directly to the President and saying, "Let me make one final plea, Mr. President, I ask you to have mercy on the people in our nation who are scared now. There are gay, lesbian, and transgender children in Democratic, Republican, and Independent families, some who fear for their lives." She went on to say, "The vast majority of immigrants are not criminals," calling them, "good neighbors" and "faithful members" of religious communities."<sup>4</sup> "Have mercy..." she said.

Jesus met people where they were in the messy in-between of righteousness and mercy. I think the grumblers in the crowd would have really enjoyed it if they had witnessed Jesus hitting Zacchaeus with some judgment and a stern lecture on the right way to behave. It probably would have been easier for Jesus to go along with what the crown wanted and call Zacchaeus out. But instead, he met him where he was and offered him mercy; he offered him the opportunity to make things right and he offered him the gift of community that comes from restored relationships.

In this season in our nation, I believe we are going to have some decisions to make. We are going to have to decide how to engage with people who have said and done things that have hurt people we love, maybe even ourselves. We can meet their questions, their grief, and their changes of heart with righteousness and we can rub their noses in their decisions. Or can call them out on every horrible thing that is going on in our nation right now. Or we can call them in and find a way forward. That doesn't mean we shouldn't say hard things. It means we have to move forward knowing that if one of us isn't whole, none of us are.

Friends, I think there is a lot of ground between righteousness and mercy. We will miss a lot of life if we cling to righteousness so tightly that nobody measures up and

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<sup>4</sup> Stanley, Tiffany, AP News, online, January 24, 2025, accessed 4/4/25.

nothing matters but right belief and right behavior. Maybe life will be easier and more joyful and fuller if we lean into the messy, imperfect in-between of humanness and extend mercy to other people and to ourselves. We can speak the truth while we offer someone who disagrees with us food. We can stand our ground for justice while we offer a cool drink of water. Let us practice righteousness by being merciful. If we do that, I bet we will find that love lives in the in-between. Amen.