

Luke 19:1-10

Who We Eat With Matters-Zacchaeus

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As I was studying this week's text, Luke 19:1-10, the story of Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus, I came across a poem, which is also a prayer. It's called "Behind Each Door." It was written by Martin Wallace. I will provide a link to it in my manuscript when my sermon is posted online. Will you join me in prayer?

Behind Each Door

As you and I walk down this terraced street
Where all the houses seem to be from a common mold
And each door looks the same,
It would be easy to be mistaken
And assume that those inside each house
Are from a common mold.
You and I know, Lord,
That each household has a different story
Of happiness, heartache, and health,
wealth, weariness, and worry,
sadness, solitude, and sickness,
energy, encouragement, and excitement.

I see pictures of biblical villages,
With square white houses all the same,
When the same assumption could be made.
Yet you cut through all of that
And treated everyone differently:
'Follow ...'; 'Return ...'; 'Give away ...'; 'Be reborn ...'; 'Tell everyone ...';
'Keep silent ...'.

Keep me alive, Lord,
To the special uniqueness
Behind each door.

written by Martin Wallace, *City Prayers*, Canterbury Press, 1994. Posted on **Emergent Kiwi**.

<http://www.emergentkiwi.org.nz/archive/creationary-zacchaeus-story-in-luke-19/#ixzz2gljz6xC>

Today's scripture reading is another of the stories the author of Luke imagined happened as Jesus and his followers made their way to Jerusalem. During this season of Lent, we have walked along with them, reflecting on these familiar stories and connecting them to our own lives. As Jesus draws closer to Jerusalem in Luke's narrative, we see once again, that what is good news to some people is pretty scary to others. 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."

If you have been reading along in the Gospel of Luke, you would not expect this encounter with Jesus to end well for Zacchaeus. After all, the author of Luke had quite a few harsh things to say about rich people. Zacchaeus, though, was not only wealthy, his money was made on the backs of his neighbors. His job as chief tax collector made him an unpopular guy. In the Roman Empire, tax collectors purchased the right to collect taxes from their neighbors and they profited from what they charged above and beyond what they owed the Roman government. Earlier in Luke when some tax collectors asked John the Baptist, "Teacher what should we do?" He told them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed to you," (Luke 3:12-13) which effectively would have put them out of business. They had to collect more, or they made nothing.

Jericho was a big city, so as chief tax collector, Zacchaeus would have had several tax collectors under him, collecting on his behalf, like a pyramid scheme. He probably had no friends, unless the people who worked for him pretended to like him. It's hard to build healthy, lasting relationships with your neighbors while you are working for their oppressors. Zacchaeus was very much a part of the Roman system. His neighbors wouldn't have been caught dead hanging out with him.

The story says Zacchaeus was short. The author likely wanted us to imagine that he was physically short, but also short in terms of his moral standing. Zacchaeus may have said to himself, "Somebody has to collect the taxes. If I don't do it, somebody else will---if I quit, taxes won't go away. It's possible someone else would be worse." And truthfully, there were plenty of people who would gladly take his lucrative job, even some of the ones who despised him for doing the job. So, when Zacchaeus heard Jesus, a guy who had a reputation for hanging out with tax collectors and other sinners, he probably thought,

“I just want to see him. Maybe he will see there is more to me than what I do to earn a living.”

And for some reason, Jesus noticed him up there in that tree and invited himself to Zacchaeus’ house. This was not received well by the crowd. Of all the people...Jesus chose to eat with literally the worst guy in town, outside of the Romans. That was just like him. He had done this before. I wonder what Zacchaeus was thinking on the way home. It’s not like he could call ahead to tell his family he was bringing someone home for dinner. This was a big deal because, likely, they didn’t have that many guests. Who would want to eat with him?

And now, this is where the story gets interesting. Very often, after talking about what an awful guy Zacchaeus was and how unusual it was that anybody, especially a good Jew like Jesus, would eat with him, preachers will use this next part of the story to talk about the importance of repentance.

Generally, here’s how that would go: Jesus went to the home of a despised chief tax collector who responded to his unexpected visit with repentance. He turned from his greedy, sinful, tax collector-y ways and he made this promise:

“Look,” he said, “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.”

Jesus responded to Zacchaeus’ promise by welcoming him to the family of God, saying, “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.” Then a good preacher might say to her congregation, when we encounter Jesus, that encounter should inspire us to turn from our sin and turn toward the ways of God. And when we do, God will forgive us and welcome us back into the safety of family and a right

relationship with God. Just like Zacchaeus! And everyone will live happily ever after!

This traditional interpretation teaches us that repentance always comes first. I bet most of us would say that's what we believe. When we do something wrong, we have to stop doing it and acknowledge our sin, then God will forgive us and our relationship with God is restored. But what if that isn't the message of this story? What if that isn't really how God's forgiveness works? Are we the kind of people who can let go of a deeply embedded, but flawed theological construct, especially one that seems so foundational to our faith? I mean...when someone hurts us, repentance comes first and then forgiveness. So, it's probably the same for God, right?

But, here's the thing...the more I learn and experience, the more I see that we, as human beings, really like to assign *our ways* to God. That's why we end up with so many rules and formulas. We need procedures and boundaries. We need hoops to jump through because if something seems too good to be true, it is. We say God is in charge, yet we make the rules about how God behaves. What if God is not into our rules?

Let's look again at what Zacchaeus said to Jesus that day.

"Look," he said, "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." (NRSV)

"Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold." (RSV)

Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold. (KJV)

On the screen there is a comparison of several translations of this verse. What I want us to look at specifically is a subtle grammatical difference between the New Revised Standard Version, generally the version I prefer, and both the Revised Standard and King James versions. And I want us to remember...translators make interpretation decisions.

The New Revised Standard has Zacchaeus talking to Jesus in future tense, “I will give” and “I will pay.” In other words, Zacchaeus is telling Jesus what he will do in the future. The Revised Standard and the King James versions, on the other hand, use present tense, “I give” and “I restore.” Zacchaeus is telling Jesus what he already does. According to Rev. Dr. David Lose, in his commentary for *Working Preacher*, “translators who translate these verbs as future oriented appeal to a grammatical category called present-future tense.” The trouble with that, in this case, is the only occurrences of this verb tense is in this one verse. Lose writes, “Yes, that’s right, rather than translate this sentence in the present tense---which of course would muck up interpreting this as a repentance scene---translators have actually created a new grammatical category that occurs once and only once to justify their theological interpretation and bias.”

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/zacchaeus-and-the-reformation>

Why? Why would the translators go to all that trouble? Why can’t Jesus welcome Zacchaeus to the family as he was, as he had been, as the chief tax collector, without having him make promises to be different? Because human beings need hoops to jump through. Because we believe the narrative that God is so disgusted with our flaws that, until we quit doing what we are doing, God will keep us at arm’s length. We have decided that God’s desire for justice or rightness is stronger than God’s love. And, I believe, we have decided that because, deep down, that’s how we feel.

Can we imagine that God would just forgive sin, apart from some meaningful repentance? After all, if God just forgave us, where is the justice and making things right? Well, what if God doesn't care as much about justice as we do? Later in his commentary, Lose writes, "Maybe justice is our way of tracking each other, our way of defining each other, of keeping count, of keeping score, of following who's in and who's out, what up and who's down. If this is so, if God's love regularly trumps God's justice...God, Jesus, the whole biblical story, as it turns out, isn't primarily about justice, but about relationship, God's deep, abiding, tenacious desire to be in relationship with each and all of us."

Don't misunderstand what I am saying. In our relationships with one another, justice is vital. We cannot claim to love our neighbors and not be concerned with the ways in which injustice affects their lives and our lives together. We can't claim to love our Black siblings and accept a legislator's racist slip of the tongue or be satisfied with a high school sports announcer's excuse about why he uttered racist language into a microphone he didn't know was on. Repentance is needed, the damage done by their racism must be repaired.

On this weekend, as we observe the one-year anniversary of Brionna Taylor's death, we cannot claim to love our neighbors and not hear their cries for accountability and not be willing to work with our neighbors for police reform. There is a lot of repentance that needs to happen regarding systemic racism in this country. As long as white people continue to deny racism exists and their own role in racism, I don't think forgiveness and reconciliation are possible. Justice needs to come for everyone. We need it for our relationships with one another.

But what if God deals with us differently? Is it possible that Luke wasn't telling us a story of repentance, but a story of God's love in the midst of our messiness? In the story, Zacchaeus was the chief tax collector,

working for the “man” and, if we believe the translations of the Revised Standard and King James versions, he took care of people who were poor and he more than made it right if he cheated someone. And yet...he had a lot of money. How do we square that? Maybe that’s the point. We don’t. And God doesn’t. Jesus met Zacchaeus where he was, how he was, and welcomed him into the family, not because he promised to change, not because he promised to quit his job, but because in the kin-dom of God, everyone belongs.

You may be thinking, “I can’t believe that. People can’t just do whatever they want and expect God to forgive them and expect to be called “children of God.” If you are saying that to yourself or out loud at home, my question to you is, “Why not?” Why don’t you want to believe in a God who loves more fully, BIGGER, with fewer strings, than human beings? Why can’t we believe that unconditional love and acceptance exist in the presence of the Holy?

I don’t think this story is about what we have to do or say to be forgiven, to be in right relationship with God. I think this story is about a God who sees the mistakes we make, over and over again, and doesn’t wait for us to realize the damage we have done before forgiving us. God can just forgive sin and God can welcome everyone. Why? Because it’s God and God is determined to be in relationship with all of us, even when the relationship is very one-sided.

I know this is a little uncomfortable for us because we like our hoops, we like our rules. They give us the illusion that we are in control. To be clear, for a very long time, Christians have been happy to tell people what they have to do to be forgiven, to participate in communion, to get baptized, to be a member, to go to heaven. This story reminds us that we don’t decide who is in and who is out. God does. And if the chief tax collector is in, everyone is in. Everyone.

It matters who we eat with. If we only ever eat with the people who do all the right things, who agree with our way of thinking, who make us look good, then the truth is, we will find ourselves eating alone. If God only wanted a relationship with us when we were getting it right, God would have a lot of free time. We are all a little bit like Zacchaeus. We do the wrong things and sometimes it takes years to realize it. Sometimes we never realize it. But sometimes we do the right things too. Sometimes we do the right things and we think they are the wrong things. The point is, it is good that God loves us through all of it because we are a mess. Maybe God figures if God just keeps loving and forgiving maybe we will get better at it too. Maybe instead of hurting each other and perpetrating injustice on each other, we will choose love which will inspire us to work for justice. And maybe, knowing God has already forgiven the ones who have hurt us will take some pressure off of us and give us space to heal.

Healing happens best in community, amid people who love us and see us as we are. That's why every week, we gather at a table that is symbolic of God's vision of beloved community. We honor that vision best by inviting other people to join us, even the ones we think will make things messy. And we have to tell them they can come exactly as they are, and they can bring their friends and their family because there is always enough to eat and drink. It's okay if the table is crowded...there is always room for one more. Amen.