

“Sinner Meets Savior”

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Providence United Methodist Church

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Today’s gospel lesson comes from the book of Luke, chapter 19, verses 1 through 10. I’ll be reading from the New Revised Standard Version. Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax 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 will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will payback 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.” This is God’s word for God’s people. Thanks be to God.

Let’s pray. God bless the reading, hearing, and understanding of your word. We trust you have prepared our hearts for this message. *Open* hearts that are closed, and *change* minds that aren’t surrendered. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

Jericho was a busy city, and the pleasing smell of the balsam orchards would fill the air. It was the sweetest smelling city anyone could walk through. Jericho was a tax center in Palestine and Zacchaeus was the chief collector for that district.

You might think of Zacchaeus as a broker and other tax collectors reported to him. He made sure he got a sizable cut from every tax collector who answered to him.

Scripture states he was rich. Tax collectors were hated by many because they defrauded people. They took more than was owed and kept it for themselves. They lived in big houses and had nice clothes—so on any day they were easy to spot from a distance as they navigated through the city.

The name Zacchaeus means “the pure one” and “the righteous.” So the name Zacchaeus was rather ironic. The person of Zacchaeus brought to mind not a grin but rather loathing. As he made his way through the city people recognized him. They might send a few hard elbows into his ribs or throw some hard punches onto his back or maybe into his side. He was short of stature too, so that made him even more vulnerable in a crowd. A tax collectors’ network were other tax collectors; this was their circle of love, if you want to call it that.

Tax collectors were hated, and I’m sure they felt very alone in life. They’d chosen a vocation that would make them rich, but there was no one to share it with. Zacchaeus may have yearned for someone to talk to and do things with. It was a lonely profession. He had all his needs met but he wanted more. He wanted to be happy. He was tired of being hated and feeling so alone.

He’d heard about Jesus and how he touched people and changed them. He’d also heard that Jesus welcomed everyone—especially the outcasts of society. Jesus didn’t care who you were or what you’d done, and he loved everybody. That’s what Zacchaeus had heard about Jesus. So the day Jesus was passing through he determined to speak with this miracle worker.

Being so short was a real hindrance when the crowds were large, and wherever Jesus was, people tended to kick him out of the way and push him down. They knew who he was, and they couldn’t imagine why he was trying to get to

Jesus. He didn't want to get trampled or hurt, so he shimmed up a sycamore tree. It wasn't a high tree, and it had low branches that stretched over the road. It would be easy to get Jesus' attention as he was walking by.

Zacchaeus had been thinking a lot about his life lately. He had no friends, no one to share his life with, and all the money he had accrued seemed worthless to him. He was missing the most important thing—love and someone to love. He was tired of his bad reputation and how it separated him from people. He was ready to make a change.

The next thing he heard as Jesus approached him was Jesus calling out his name. He was wondering how Jesus even knew his name? “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” Zacchaeus was so shocked at Jesus' request he almost fell out of the tree. Everyone around heard what Jesus said. They couldn't believe it! Why would a man like Jesus be interested in spending time with *this* crook? The whole idea of Jesus even wanting to eat with this man made everyone sick! After all, he'd stolen from them. The crowd couldn't believe it! Now they were mad at Jesus!

I think there are two reasons why Jesus wanted to spend time with Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was lost. The word lost in the New Testament doesn't mean damned; it means *in the wrong place*. Zacchaeus had gotten away from God. He'd gotten in with the wrong crowd, he'd chosen a profession that had too many temptations, and he'd taken advantage of people.

He *was in the wrong place*, but . . . he was in the wrong place at the right time. His heart needed to be changed; it was in the wrong place, but he was in the right place to make a change! It was time for the sinner to meet the Savior! Maybe there was some way he could make amends. Zacchaeus allowed Jesus to change his heart.

I think the second reason Jesus wanted to spend time with Zacchaeus was because he was interested in Zacchaeus' pocketbook. Yes, Jesus is very interested in our money and what we do with it! He wanted Zacchaeus to be set free from it. Right before the two of them headed for dinner Zacchaeus seemed to know what was keeping him from the happiness he wanted; it was his money.

He jumped down from that tree so fast and made a promise and said, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will payback four times as much." His heart and his bad habits were changed. Jesus said to Zacchaeus "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."

It doesn't matter what you have in life materially if you don't have happiness and love. We all need and want it. We want acceptance, and we want to be included. We want to be loved for who we are, and we need our heart to change so that we *can* love.

Zacchaeus was a proud man. He needed nothing the world could give. What he needed and wanted was what Jesus gave him—a changed heart and changed habits. This was the day Zacchaeus resolved to meet Jesus. He cried out to Jesus, and Jesus put his heart in the right place.

What do you need today? Maybe you don't know what you need, but you do know you're not happy. Maybe you need your past redeemed so it no longer dictates your present. Maybe you need someone to guide your future in a way that's different from everything you've pursued so far in life. You just need a change. Listen to this, Jesus promises to seek and to save. He promises to bring healing and wholeness to anyone who asks.

Come forward today and receive what you need from God. Or if you're shy, right where you sit, ask Christ to come into your heart and make that needed change you can't make happen. The change might not happen in the way you expect, but God will guide and point you in the right direction. Let's pray.

Holy God who loves and prays for us, enable us to embrace the change in our lives we've been looking for. Take any fear away we might have about making this change. Give us courage, and pour down your convincing grace on us to know we've waited long enough. *Today is the day we'll ask you for what we need most.* Amen.