

When Justice is Not “Just Us”

Luke 19:1-10

When I was first introduced to the story of Zacchaeus, it came in the form of a Sunday School song.

Zacchaeus was a wee little man
and a wee little man was he;
He climbed up in a sycamore tree
for the Lord he wanted to see.
And when the Lord passed by that way
he looked up in that tree,
And he said, “Zacchaeus, you come down,
for I’m going to your house today.
I’m going to your house today.”

That was the story as I came to know it. Jesus went to the house of a little man and made him happy. It naturally appealed to me because I, too, was a wee little man and a wee little man was me (I was even named “Paul,” which means “small,” because my parents didn’t have high expectations of me!). Standing next to my three brothers in our annual Christmas photo, I was always the vertically challenged one in the middle—a runt even next to my younger brother, Peter, who as a baby was bigger than I was at three. So I claimed this affirming “Jesus Loves [even] Me” message as a just comeuppance to any of them who would pick on me because I was the family shortstop. For most people, that likely is what’s memorable about this Gospel story—that it’s a cute little tale about Jesus watching out for the little people of the world.

It was many years later, however, when I realized that the physical size of the main character has little to do with why this story is included in Luke’s Gospel. The Sunday School song left out the important part of what happened when Jesus went to Zacchaeus’ home that day. Once you learn the rest of the story (as Paul Harvey used to say), that’s when you realize

who Zacchaeus was, what he represented, and what happened when he met Jesus. Let me acquaint you with the setting of this story.

It all takes place in the city of Jericho which was (and still is) located in the Jordan River valley, situated between Galilee to the north and the Dead Sea to the south. It is one of the oldest cities on earth (over 9000 years old), and one of the best preserved because of the arid climate. In Jesus' day, it was an oasis in the desert wilderness of Judea. Jericho was a major commercial city on a main trading route, so it was both prosperous and relatively spicy in terms of the various characters who walked the streets.

One of the city's most prosperous residents was Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector of the region. The reason we know he was wealthy and powerful wasn't because he was a Roman government official, representing the imperial rule. No. Taxes back then, though owed to Rome, were handled in most cases in marketplace fashion. Tax collection was contracted out by the Roman authorities to local entrepreneurs who collected taxes from their people on Rome's behalf. Like a collection agency, someone like Zacchaeus would pay what was owed to Rome up front and then be granted permission and authority to go after everyone for taxes on both property and especially commerce. Surcharges were levied at the discretion of the tax collector, which ensured he made a nice tidy profit in the process. If anyone balked or refused to pay, he had the backing of the imperial guards to ensure code enforcement and compliance. It was sweet, lucrative deal for anyone who didn't mind being despised.

However, to shield himself from direct hostility, as the chief tax collector, Zacchaeus wouldn't even have had to do the dirty work; he simply hired henchmen to collect the taxes on his behalf. Most of those who

worked for him were fairly unscrupulous as well, marginal people earning a day's wage as long as they were intimidating or clever—sort of like an ancient form of the Mob. So, someone like Matthew, let's say, would have served as one of these henchmen, employed by someone like Zacchaeus, and together they would have been despised by the general population, and especially by local merchants and landowners.

Now in a cosmopolitan setting like ancient Jericho, it wouldn't have mattered too much. That was the way business was conducted. Everyone knew that. Zacchaeus could live quite well and enough commerce would have kept him among the one-percent. That sort of privilege affords you a lot of protection and respect. A chief tax collector was virtually untouchable, even by local government officials. Rome didn't care how corrupt the system was as long as their end was paid up front. And conveniently, tax collection deflected the normal ire toward Caesar and redirected it to his local minions behind the periodic shakedown when they came calling.

Zacchaeus would have made out quite well with this arrangement. Still, it might have been lonely at the top, since as a rule few people with an eye on their public reputation would associate with such a contemptible scoundrel. Zacchaeus would have been like a man without a country, since Rome only used him and Judeans would have disowned and despised him, which is why this story sets up as a masterful takedown by ridiculing Zacchaeus' diminutive stature—the perfect foil for such a small-minded greedy, self-serving man.

If the story ended here, then its message might have been a fire and brimstone indictment for anyone like Zacchaeus who made their deal with the devil. Prophets come out of the woodwork to rage against the

corruption and greed of the powers that be. People like him are the ones we resent in our own society who are chronically corrupt but untouchable. If you're a Trump devotee, you'd be railing today about Hillary Clinton and her endless emails, or Benghazi, or the Clinton Foundation, or anything else that boils your blood. If you're a Clinton supporter, it's the Teflon finish Trump seems to have over terrible things he's done—be it womanizing, or the bankruptcy of his casinos, or Trump University, his roundabout with the IRS, or his Russian relations. If either one of them had their Day of Reckoning on Election Day or thereafter, the opposition would be cheering on the prosecutors! Forget due process, just take them down out of their high perch and make them pay!

That's how we characterize justice in these times. Ultimate accountability and retribution for terrible deeds and injustices is a theme central to vigilante justice or, for that matter, any just cause. For generations, the promise of divine retribution is what has kept many people in the pews. Bring us justice, Jesus! Make the evil, corrupt ones pay for their crimes! "Lock 'em up!" as the battle cry goes.

But the story doesn't end this way, does it? Instead of publicly shaming this puny scoundrel, rather than hold Zacchaeus rightfully accountable before the people he had mercilessly exploited for his own private gain, Jesus pivoted and, instead, did something different—he acted friendly to Zacchaeus and invited himself over to his house, apparently to get a little taste of the good life at this bloodsucker's villa! It was unexpected and strange. Jesus, of all people, was going to fraternize with this clearly contemptible, heartless peewee of a man!

It must have been an utter shock to everyone, leaving them to wonder, whose side was Jesus on? Was he sucking up to the one-percent

for a little last minutes political fundraising? Was he caving in to imperial power because of pressure—because it’s easier to play the game than beat a rigged system? Where’s the justice in this? Or was Jesus like all the other outsiders—self-proclaimed “saviors” who ultimately end up watching out for their own private interests? You boil it down—every just and noble cause—every charismatic hero and slimy politician—and all you’ve got left is “just us.”

Frankly, had CNN or Fox News been covering it, the headlines would have been immediate, severe, and scandalous. Rumors and speculation could have made a real mess of Jesus’ mission; his poll numbers would have plummeted and his disciples would have panicked trying to put a positive spin on the events of the day. That’s what happens when you don’t tell the entire story—when you market half-truths and misinformation, even in Sunday School songs. You don’t really know what’s going on and you naively believe the best; or you suspect corruption and assume the worst—that even the best are like everyone else—they crack at some point and reveal their true colors and deceitful motivations—that moral sensibilities and ethical aspirations never really add up to anything beyond being about “just us.” It’s the basic law of human existence predicated on each one’s selfish bias: you can cry for justice but, in the end, what is just is only what seems just for us.

Perhaps, this is why Christian moral values and ethics are best not derived from Sunday School half-truths. The rest of the story—the part we weren’t told, the one we didn’t sing about—is what conveys the Gospel message, i.e., what happened when Jesus paid a pastoral visit to Zacchaeus’ house and, in turn, what Zacchaeus did in response to Jesus’ overture. It’s hard to say whether the moment of truth would have occurred immediately

as the story suggests, or more likely, after Jesus had spent some time with him. In any case, Zacchaeus did something no one in Jericho (or Rome, for that matter) could have foreseen.

Of his great wealth, fifty-percent of it Zacchaeus would voluntarily give to the poor, and then, if he defrauded anyone (which of course he did all the time to merchants and property owners) he would repay them four times as much!

Honestly, I can't imagine what the numbers looked like, but you'd have to assume that Zacchaeus probably lost most of his worldly wealth in that one public pronouncement! That was an example of costly discipleship! Yet, in that remarkable and just act, he grasped his own redemption!

When this wee little man started making amends, I'm sure there were plenty of people willing to take him up on his offer. However, I reserve the right to believe there may have also been many others in Jericho who were angry and resentful that Jesus didn't punish him first for all the corruption and injustices that defined Zacchaeus' life up to that day. Angry people are threatened by redemption. Divine justice is supposed to deliver retribution, not redemption, in many a mind ("Lock him up!" is the cry; not save his soul!). Redemption is the last thing many victims want to see happen, even if it's rooted in remorse. Redemption is threatening to those who are angry, because their just cause for retribution is no longer relevant and the pursuit of justice is no longer about "just us."

The redemption of Zacchaeus illustrates, not retributive justice, but restorative justice, where offenders are called into account, transformed by the prospects for hope, and healed from their unjust ways by restoring what they have harmed. If Zacchaeus had not sought to undo the harm he had

brought upon others, if he had not been compelled to make amends and restore what he had unethically and selfishly taken from others, then something would be wrong; his salvation would be, in fact, a divine injustice—a convenient way to save his own soul without cost, without just accountability or fair reparations to those he had harmed—a self-serving act that is inconsistent with God’s justice and the divine ethic that we live humbly, mercifully, and justly with others. His salvation would have been another example of “cheap grace,” not justice.

But as the story shows, restorative justice is transformational to the individual soul and to the community as a whole, by giving an offender the opportunity to repair the damage done to victims by their criminally reckless deeds. It is redemption which positively changes the world and blunts the force of even legitimate retribution. Jericho was never the same once Zacchaeus made good on his word and I would imagine there may have been a few of his neighbors who eventually came to view him, ironically, as a true giant of a man. Isn’t that a better end? Doesn’t that part of the story provide a fitting conclusion for what divine grace is for? It’s not to let people off the hook; it’s to give them a chance to do what’s right and just.

I suspect we all might learn from the moral lesson of Zacchaeus’ story—the wee little man who embodied the benefit and impact of merciful redemption and divine grace. Grace is a popular topic in the Christian world, right at the heart of Reformation Sunday. However, we’d have to acknowledge this restorative power has yet to truly impact and transform the outlook and character of many a person’s life in our predominantly Christian country, or the collective conscience and culture of our American

way of life, given our thirst for retribution and the punitive way we address justice.

We might rightfully ask, what is justice if we only make it about what we want—when we don't only make it about "just us"? What truly saves our collective souls, other than to heal people's broken lives and repair the harm that's been done?

If that's what this crazy Sunday School story is trying to teach us, then there's a lesson more relevant to us today than we ever would have remembered.

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