

Seeing, Believing, Reflecting  
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury  
Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4; Luke 19:1-10

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Reformation Sunday

[following reading of Habbakuk lesson]

I have always been taken by the wording of Habakkuk 2:2, “write the vision, make it plain on tablets so a runner can read it.” Yet, these days I am further amazed at how one we today call a minor prophet could foresee God’s word being read from an I-Pad, a tablet!

Habakkuk was writing at a time when armies of the empire of Babylon were on the border of Israel, ready to begin its takeover. The prophecy is a final warning to take heed. The verse about the runner seeing the vision is not quite accurate, as many scholars now believe the intent is that people would see the vision and run. That running could be to run away in fear, or to run with the vision to spread the word.

Our Gospel lesson is also about seeing, but in a more individual way. As some of us learned in Sunday School, “Zacchaeus was a wee little man, a wee little man was he...” So begins the familiar song about the short tax collector who climbed a sycamore tree to see Jesus. Short, tax collector, and tree may be the only parts most of us remember from this story, found in Luke’s Gospel alone.

Over the past four months, since Luke wrote Jesus turned his face to head to Jerusalem, we have watched what happens at each stop along the way – who approaches Jesus, who challenges him, who touches him, who grumbles about him, who plots his death. Today, Jesus is passing through Jericho, and while scant on detail, we know there is a crowd large enough that some were unable to see. One might imagine the crowd allowing small children to move to the front to catch a glimpse of Jesus, but one in the crowd will not be accorded such access.

Short in stature, Zacchaeus is not only a tax collector, but a ruler among the tax collectors. This is thought to mean he had sub-contractors who actually collected taxes for him, which meant they had to charge enough to make a living themselves, as well as pay Zacchaeus. Luke affirms Zacchaeus was rich.

Most societies today accord status to the rich. Sometimes wealth is regarded as a sign of God’s blessing, but in any case, it represents power, prestige, and privilege. In biblical culture as well, wealth meant status; that is, unless one’s fortune is gained through making money off the populace. Tax collectors and toll takers, who paid the Romans a fee for their jobs, would sacrifice social status for monetary wealth.

Thus, in our lesson, a wealthy Zacchaeus is of low status. He is also of low stature. One might sense a certain delight in the crowd keeping this rich, but much despised man from seeing Jesus, and we might even hear the crowd snickering as the tax collector shimmies up a tree to see Jesus. Our lesson is Luke 19:1-10, and I will be using the Common English Bible translation:

*Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through town. <sup>2</sup> A man there named Zacchaeus, a ruler among tax collectors, was rich. <sup>3</sup> He was trying to see who Jesus was, but, being a short man, he couldn't because of the crowd. <sup>4</sup> So he ran ahead and climbed up a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus, who was about to pass that way. <sup>5</sup> When Jesus came to that spot, he looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, come down at once. I must stay in your home today." <sup>6</sup> So Zacchaeus came down at once, happy to welcome Jesus.*

*<sup>7</sup> Everyone who saw this grumbled, saying, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."*

*<sup>8</sup> Zacchaeus stopped and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord, I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone, I repay them four times as much."*

*<sup>9</sup> Jesus said to him, "Today, salvation has come to this household because he too is a son of Abraham. <sup>10</sup> The Human One came to seek and save the lost."*

In January, I took a course that surveyed all the lectionary passages in Luke for this year. The professor opened with the suggestion the Gospel of Luke pictured the Jewish world as being composed of innies and outies. Chuckles followed as I expect many of us attending harkened back to elementary school days when there was a fascination with which way our navels pointed – whether we had an innie or an outie.

While using the term to provoke attention and enhance comprehension, the professor suggested the innies of Jewish culture were those who lived within the boundaries of the Jewish law and were deemed righteous, clean, holy, saved, pure.

By contrast, the outies were those who, by gender, life situation, disability, or sin were considered ritually impure or unclean, recalling that disease or disability was often considered a judgment of God. And as we have heard quite a few times along Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, tax collectors were grouped with sinners into this outie circle, in spite of their wealth.

We have read how Jesus would walk into a company of outies without blinking an eye, but as in today's lesson, the innies would grumble, *"He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."* At times, Jesus is touched by or himself touches an outie, and thus he supposedly becomes ritually unclean. Even when invited to dine with an innie Pharisee, Jesus heals an outie woman.

Jesus sits and eats with the outies because he needs to be with those in need of his mercy and grace. Of course, that is everyone, but the outies know it, and the innies do not.

Now to confuse things, Luke's Gospel has its own set of outies in terms of Jesus' kingdom work. The religious establishment, more interested in rules than mercy, while the innies in the culture, are outies in Luke's Gospel, as are those who have great wealth. In just the previous chapter, Jesus declared "How hard it will be for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven." The innies of Luke's gospel are the poor, the oppressed, the widow, the orphan, and even outsider Samaritans. The lines are fairly clearly drawn in Luke, which is why the story of Zacchaeus can throw us off.

One might say in today's imagery, Jesus is walking down Jericho's Main Street, looks up in a tree and sees a man from Wall Street. Having just told another rich ruler to sell all he has and give it to the poor, we anticipate an equal challenge for Zacchaeus. To keep Luke's rule of who is an innie and who is an outie, Zacchaeus can't possibly keep the money he has accumulated. And this is where we are thrown off from our carefully concocted delineations of what Luke's Gospel seems to teach as to who is in and who is out, who is pure and who is stained, who is saved and who is condemned.

Zacchaeus wants to see who Jesus is. This is more than a desired photo op with a famous person. Something has been stirred within this rich tax collector that causes him to risk humiliation by climbing a tree. We don't know how Jesus knew his name, but he calls Zacchaeus down, and tells him, "*I must stay in your home today.*" In so doing, Jesus implies he would have table fellowship with the tax collector, a sign of parity and acceptance. It was at that that the religious innies grumbled, but Zacchaeus was happy to receive Jesus into his household.

Now, depending on what translation of the story we read, there is a difference of opinion as to whether Zacchaeus changed at this point. While the tense of the Greek can differ, translations such as the Common English Bible reveal that when the tax collector tells Jesus he gives half his possessions to the poor, and repays anyone cheated fourfold, it is not something he promises to do in the future, as other translations imply. It is a statement of what he has been doing. In other words, Zacchaeus could be thought to be following ethical standards in his work, even though he did not have to do so, would not be credited with doing so, and knowing such ethical practices would still not shield him from being despised because of his profession as a tax collector.

Upon hearing Zacchaeus, Jesus declared, "*Today, salvation has come to this household.*" Jesus recognized Zacchaeus' life was reflecting his salvation, and affirms him as a child of Abraham. In other words, as despised as you are by others, you are an innie in God's kingdom. Without even asking, the question is left for the grumblers, "Do you conduct yourselves as children of Abraham?" [Green, Joel, Luke, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 1997), p. 668]

A key teaching of the Reformation was the understanding one could not buy grace. One cannot earn one's salvation by works, including the purchase of indulgences, though I have often thought selling indulgences for either actual sin or imagined guilt would be a great means of funding a capital campaign!

Grace alone. Grace is a gift of God. It is a gift seen in the story of Zacchaeus, who was an outie in terms of his social status because of his work, and also an outie in Luke's order of things because of his wealth. Jesus cuts through such delineations, breaking down such human boundaries. As he states in the last verse of his lesson, his mission is to seek and save the lost.

Grace does not come via a human formula to account for who is saved and who is not, who is in and who is out. Even Luke's Gospel takes a turn. As Joel Green writes in his Luke commentary, "In his characterization of Zacchaeus, Luke pulls the rug from under every cliché, every formula by which people's status before God might be calculated." [Ibid., p. 667]

The Reformation did not create the perfect church, nor were the Reformers always right. Most, including Luther and Calvin, opposed the theory of a Polish astronomer named Copernicus, who suggested the earth might rotate around the sun rather than the sun around the earth. Even as Reformers opposed theologies of division and practices of corruption, new divisions emerged. While at Montreat earlier this month, I went to the Presbyterian Historical Society and read a display about the Scot's Confession. I learned that following approval of the Scot's Confession, a declaration was issued within a week that the Pope had no jurisdiction, the mass was not to be celebrated, and all doctrine contrary to the Reformed faith was condemned. Reformed, but still maintaining a delineation of innies and outies, imprints our human nature upon reformation.

Jesus calls us to a higher nature, of reformation that transcends our human tendencies to divide by innies and outies, to believe we know who is saved and who is not. Jesus calls us past our tendencies to grumble when grace is offered to any we might deem unworthy, to those who have not earned it. Earned it? That is where we can catch ourselves – none of us have earned grace.

In our Reformed Church tradition, we consider ourselves to be “Reformed and always being reformed by the Spirit of Christ.” It seems to me this means we are to always be willing to climb a tree to catch a new view of Jesus, and be open to the reforming power of Christ's Spirit when he invites himself to our house.

Jesus' declared salvation as having come to Zacchaeus' household, not to Zacchaeus alone. Even if still ostracized by others, they were received by Jesus. The tax collector had not only sought to see Jesus, believed Jesus, and welcomed Jesus, but his life, work and household reflected God's salvation.

As Joel Green writes, “Salvation' ... refers to restoration to the community of God's people, a reality marked for Zacchaeus by Jesus' presence in his home.” [Ibid., p. 673] As with Zacchaeus, salvation is not determined by saying the right words, or thinking we are protecting the church or even Christ himself, by separating innies from outies. Salvation is revealed when we welcome the reforming power of Christ into our homes, and then have the courage to have our life and work reflect the gift of our salvation.