

A Friend of Sinners and Tax Collectors

Luke 19:1-10 by Patty Friesen October 30/22

My name is Zaccheus, but I get called a lot of other names. I'm the chief tax collector in Jericho. I am rich - very rich. I have servants, I wear the best clothes in Jericho and ride in the nicest chariot - a four horse power Tesla – totally carbon-free. We tax collectors get a bad rap like you all heard last Sunday when your preacher preached about the Pharisee and the tax collector – saying tax collectors are offensive. I was offended that he said we were offensive. Everyone assumes we're the bad guys because we collect property and income and sales taxes and custom fees for the Romans. I'm just doing my job collecting taxes – them's the rules, I don't make them. Them's the rules – don't try to break them.

I get results. The Romans want their share and they audit my books. It's my head if they don't get their share but they don't care what we charge on top of that which is why people assume we're taking more than our share of the cut but I'm just covering expenses. It's not an easy being hated for just doing your job and being on the outs with your religious community. I'm Jewish and my community thinks I'm unclean for dealing with the Romans. No one understands me and certainly no one respects me. I just think they are jealous.

I've got to tell you what happened to me **today**. I heard about this Jesus of Nazareth - everyone had heard about him. He was both revered and reviled. The religious people hated him so he intrigued me. He didn't care what other people thought of him. He said it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven, yet people called him a friend of sinners and rich tax collectors. He was a wild card and I had to see him. The news bulletin was he was coming to our city Jericho and that he had just healed a blind beggar at the gates of Jericho. The crowd went wild and were following him into the city.

You could say I'm structurally challenged and would never be able to see over the crowd - even standing up in my Tesla so I jumped out of it and ran and climbed a sycamore tree. I've always been an action man. I've always known how to get on top of the crowd. A sycamore tree has low hanging evergreen branches with fruit that the poor eat ironically. That gave the crowd a good laugh seeing me up in the tree with my toga blowing in the breezes. It may have been considered undignified but I've long lost the respect of others so I didn't care. My neighbours have always been jealous of my ability to rise above no matter what it takes. That's why they call ambition a sin.

When Jesus got to my tree, he looked up and must have seen my ambition. He looked me right in the eye like he was doing a spiritual audit and he called me by name, "Zaccheus, hurry down for I must stay at your house **today**." I couldn't believe it - that he would honour me by coming to my house and declaring it in front of everyone! That sure showed them. By coming to my house to eat, he was putting himself on my level and making himself unclean like I am. You can't imagine what that kind of acceptance feels like.

All who *saw* what had happened grumbled about it. The blind man had desired to see (18:41), and I had desired to see Jesus (19:3). Now the crowd *sees* Jesus doing the work of the kingdom, and they grumble. Jesus had declared, "Blessed are the eyes that see!" (10:23), but here are eyes that see physically but do not see spiritually (8:10). All they can see is their predetermined judgment that I was a sinner (19:7) and nothing was going to change their opinion. They shouted out to Jesus how I had overcharged and cheated all of them.

We hadn't even got to my house yet and I thought Jesus might ask to see my real accounting quick books - not the books I show the Romans. It was a moment of truth and reconciliation. In a pre-emptive strike, I got on top of the situation and I declared right then and

there in the street that I would give half my possessions to the poor and if I had defrauded anyone, I would repay it four times as much. So I called my servants and told them to pay everyone back what I had taken from them. And everyone became happier with me. (Pass out candies!)

I know the Law of Moses. According to Lev 6:5, “you shall repay the principal amount and shall add one-fifth to it. You shall pay it to its owner when you realize your guilt” (NRSV; cf. Num 5:7). I added to that restitution by paying four times as much. I didn’t grovel and ask Jesus to forgive me for my sins - I knew what he wanted of me and I gave it to him. I knew I needed an economic response to his salvation. No groveling, no haggling, no handwringing. I think Jesus liked my direct style of action but it wasn’t just about me and him - it was about making things right in my community.

Then in response to my pay back to the community, Jesus said, **Today** salvation has come to this house, for Zaccheus too is a child of Abraham and Sarah. John the Baptist had warned the crowds to bear fruits worthy of repentance and not even to consider saying “we have Abraham and Sarah as our ancestors” (3:8). Jesus declared that I was a true child of Abraham and Sarah because of my actions of restitution. A camel could not pass through the eye of a needle, but God could lead me, a rich man into the kingdom of God (see 18:25-26), and God could raise up children of Abraham from stones (3:8)—or even from among tax collectors.

They even made a song about me, “Zaccheus was a wee little man and a wee little man was he. He climbed up into a sycamore tree for the Lord he wanted to see. And when the Savior passed that way, He looked up in the tree And said, 'Zacchaeus, you come down! For I'm going to your house **today** For I'm going to your house **today**!' Zacchaeus was a wee little man. But a

happy man was he, for he had seen the Lord that day, And a happy man was he; And a very happy man was he.”

Jesus is the real hero of this story. I just wanted to see Jesus all for myself but I ended up being restored to my community **today**. Luke’s gospel uses the term **today** eleven times, often emphatically. The angelic chorus announces gladly, “To you is born **today** in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord” (2:11, italics added). In Nazareth, Jesus explains, “**Today** this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (4:21). And to the thief on the cross, Jesus promises, “Truly I tell you, **today** you will be with me in Paradise” (23:43).

God is doing great things **today!** **Today** is the time of truth and reconciliation and rebuilding our community. **Today** is the time to open our eyes and see what God is doing all around us. When even one person like me is offered acceptance, and hears a word of affirmation, life can be different, we are empowered to live by a new set of values in the future, there we all *see* the kingdom of God at work. Jesus saw me **today** - saw my past but also saw my future and invited me to take initiative in it. Jesus wants to see me restored as a valued part of a whole community – which leads me to a new song – Won’t you sing, sing, sing with me – won’t you sing a song of peace (repeat) and exit.