

A Welcome for Others

communion meditation

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Luke 5:29-32; 19:1-10

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You might call it “a gospel within the gospel.” Contrary to our tendency to focus on isolated instances within the gospel story as if somehow they each stand alone, that was not the way the Gospels were written. Each of the Gospel writers develops the story of Jesus’ ministry within a broader theme, intimately connected to the particular identity and needs of the audience to whom he is writing; and although Mark, the first of the Gospels, influences Matthew and Luke, each writer gathers the stories and teachings of Jesus and positions them in relation to each other to develop his overarching theme as well as to demonstrate brief, more pointed themes within his text. Luke is certainly no exception. The four chapters immediately preceding the instance we used to sing about as children—“Zacchaeus was a wee little man”—surround that familiar little story and give it a world of meaning we might very well miss apart from its larger context.

The highly esteemed New Testament scholar of the last century, T.W. Manson, gathered the four chapters building to the story of Zacchaeus and, noting their similar concerns, called them “the Gospel of the Outcast.” Opening with the three parables about joy in discovering that which has been lost—the lost sheep, coin and son—the chapters contain the parable of the rich man and Lazarus and the cleansing of the ten lepers. Arriving at chapter 18, it’s almost as if Luke pens every word in anticipation of Zacchaeus’s story that will emerge in chapter 19. The parables of the persistent widow who will not be denied justice and the Pharisee and tax collector praying in the Temple, the receiving of the kingdom as a little child and the stories of the rich ruler who goes sorrowfully away and the blind man who is healed in Jericho—all speak to obstacles encountered on the path to salvation—obstacles usually placed there by the low expectations of others.

One widow out of hundreds of widows might, of course, be easily overlooked in tending to more pressing matters; and any reasonable disciple might turn aside boisterous children, given the importance of this rabbi and his weighty last words as he headed to Jerusalem. The rich man—well that, of course, was a pity. He could have been useful; but, as Luke’s own experience has demonstrated and as Jesus himself will say, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God” (18:25). The crowd’s question of Jesus—“Then who can be saved?”—and Jesus’ response—“What is impossible for mortals is possible for God”—set the stage for what will transpire in Jericho—the healing of the blind man, who sees more than the crowds surrounding him, and Jesus’ encounter with Zacchaeus.

Who can be saved? Surely not this little weasel of a man that everyone loved to hate. It’s possible that his very height is a judgment on who he is. The word for stature (*helikta*) can also be translated “maturity” or “character.” In other words, Zacchaeus was lacking in character. He was a Jew who collected money from his own people for the despicable Roman government. In the process, he had a free hand to take as much as he wanted to take. He could even take Roman soldiers into Jewish homes to confiscate anything he considered was being unfairly withheld. More than the tax collector who rightfully prayed in the Temple, “Lord, be merciful to me a sinner,” Zacchaeus is described by Luke as a *chief* tax collector who is very *rich*. Zacchaeus is not just a tax collector, one of many despised traitors and sinners. He is a *chief, rich* tax collector—sinner *extraordinaire*, to use the words of Hobbie Welford [*Interpretation*, 1977]. Who could expect anything of such a man?

It is as if Luke is seeking to demonstrate the words he has so recently placed upon Jesus’ lips. No “mortal,” no human, no towns person and, least of all, not even Luke himself would have had any expectation that this little man could be reclaimed for the kingdom of God. This one, given at birth the exalted Hebrew name *Zakai*, meaning “clean,” “righteous” or “pure,” is extended the opportunity by Jesus to reclaim his birthright. Turning aside from his determined path to Jerusalem, Jesus turns to this little fellow with the words, “I must stay at your house today.” More than a slight interruption, more that perhaps a chance encounter, Luke paints this moment as a moment of conversion, not just for the sake of the grumbling crowd, offended that Jesus would go into the house of a *sinner*, but perhaps a moment of conversion for Luke himself.

Like the responsible shepherd, Jesus on his way to the cross in Jerusalem turns aside to seek out and save this one who was lost. “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham” (19:9). He, too, is your brother.

How fitting that on this World Communion Sunday we are reminded that our relationship to God in Christ is established through God’s grace and mercy. “The Son of Man,” Jesus says, “came to seek out and to save the lost” (19:10). How odd, how exceedingly tragic, then, that through the centuries Jesus’ church has been entrenched in inner warfare. Initiated by the Presbyterian Church, USA, and adopted by the National Federation of Churches (forerunner of the National Council of Churches) in 1940, World Communion Sunday was birthed in the midst of one of the most fearsome eras of human history. The devastation of a world economic depression and the dawning realization of the extent of Hitler’s evil designs would see the world

plunged into cruel, bitter war. Into the midst of that bleak moment, a handful of visionaries stepped onto the stage. What if, in the midst of the turmoil and rising enmity, Christ's church chose to embody hope? What if, in the midst of the divisions cutting across nations and between nations, the church chose to bridge the divides within itself?

On this day as then, we are living in fearsome times. Spreading warfare, enmity within nations and between nations, rising economic crisis and concern for the future of our planet dominate our news. What if, in the midst of the rising panic, Christ's church were to look across the supposedly protective barriers being raised on all sides and recognize in the faces of those being branded as *other* the reality of those who are our sisters and brothers? What if, instead of churches being consumed with focusing upon our differences, we focused instead upon our oneness in Christ? What if Grace Covenant Church lived out its covenant pledge to "be an ecumenical church, joining hands with other people of faith and all people of good will to bring healing among God's children"?

Pretty words? Just a pipe dream? "*Today*," Jesus told Zacchaeus, "salvation has come to this house"-- "*today*," in the midst of *this* reality with all of its divisions, enmity and hostilities. Dare we hope and work for anything less?