

Reforming Faith

Luke 19:1-10

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Our scripture ends with a family photo. Zacchaeus the tax collector has found salvation, and so Jesus calls the whole family of faith together and says, “We have got to capture this on film.” Jesus telling Zacchaeus he is a son of Abraham is as good as saying welcome to the family, so Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob take their seats. Joseph and Moses file in. Joshua and the judges, Samuel and the prophets, David and the kings all assemble. And wee little Zacchaeus gets put in the front. The shortest always get put in the front. Smile! One big happy family.

That a tax collector like Zacchaeus would be front and center in a family photo, with the stalwarts of faith, the Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob’s, is quite appropriate for us on this Reformation Sunday. One of the foundational points of the Reformation is that we are saved by grace through faith. Grace alone. Faith alone. Zacchaeus doesn’t deserve to join that family photo. One commentator writes about tax collectors, “The tax collector is the agent of Rome and not the agent of God... The tax collector would have been presumed to be corrupt, as we see with Zacchaeus, who...is despised by the people in his town.”¹ If Zacchaeus does not deserve to be in the photo, if he is despised, if he is in cahoots with Rome and in opposition to God, how in the world does he get to sit in the photo, much less sit in the very front?

Well, grace is a free gift. Faith is simply believing the gift is for you. The second chapter in Ephesians captures the essence of salvation by faith. “Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in our transgressions.” (Ephesians 2:4,5) Grace has to do with forgiveness, and forgiveness is necessary because of our human tendency to turn away from God, to miss the mark, to sin. How does God make us alive with Christ? God freely gives the gift of forgiveness and salvation, apart from any works that we do, apart from any merit we have. Grace is definitely not something we can buy. Grace comes not because we deserve it. It is unmerited favor. “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.” (Ephesians 2:8, 9)

¹ Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*, p. 188.

This wee little man Zacchaeus is just one more way Luke communicates how the good news of the gospel is for all people. When Luke shares with us the birth of the church in the Book of Acts, Jesus sends his disciples to be his witnesses to places near and far, right where they were in Jerusalem, out to Judea, to the Samaritans, and to the ends of the earth. On the day of Pentecost when Peter preaches he reaches back to the promise that was given years before by the prophet Joel that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Everyone. Everyone might well be one of the key messages of the genealogy we find in Luke 3, a genealogy that not only traces its roots to Abraham, but a genealogy that continues all the way back to our first ancestor, to Adam, who is called the son of God. When little Zacchaeus, the tax collector, climbs down from that sycamore tree to take his picture in the family photo of faith, it is a sign and a symbol that we can all experience this gift of salvation, that we can all call upon the name of the Lord, and that we can all be saved by grace through faith.

But we wouldn't be true to the scriptures, or to the story of Zacchaeus and his conversion, nor to the story of Jesus, if we didn't address a troubling part of our passage. When Jesus interacts with Zacchaeus, when Jesus enters the home of Zacchaeus, the people who are paying attention to what Jesus is doing mutter. They say, "He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner'". This type of muttering and complaining rears its ugly head all throughout the gospel of Luke. When Jesus preaches his inaugural sermon and shares the good news that the reach of God's love will include foreigners like the Syrians the people get furious and run him out of town. When he goes to celebrate with Levi about his newfound faith the religious leaders complain that he is eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners. There is a beautiful scene in Luke 7 where a woman who has lived a difficult life humbles herself and falls at the feet of Jesus, washing his feet with her tears, anointing those precious feet, and using her hair to dry his feet. Instead of sharing in this beautiful moment the host, in whose home this scene of salvation unfolds, can only shake his head in disgust that Jesus would receive a woman like this. The happy ending of the Prodigal Son is nearly spoiled by the older brother who refuses to join in the party and has only harsh words for his penitent younger brother. Jesus comes to seek and to save those who are lost. He reaches out, he embraces, he welcomes, and then he invites each and every one to get in the picture. And it seems that every time one lost sinner slides into the picture frame there is muttering, grumbling, complaining, and criticism.

And yet God is constantly at work reforming the picture, expanding the frame, to welcome and include a broad and diverse group. When Israel bursts out of their bondage in Egypt, when they pose for a family photo as they prepare to enter the Promised Land, they are told make room in the picture for the stranger, the alien, the widow, the orphan, for the poor, and for the weak. When Jesus talks about a family photo in Matthew 25 he doesn't seem so much concerned that you and I found our place to sit in the portrait as he is with whether we made sure that the ones who were hungry, and thirsty, who were strangers, who were naked and needed clothes, who were sick and in prison, did we make sure to lift up these hurting brothers and sisters and seat them in the center of the photo. Did we continue the tradition, did we carry on the ministry of Jesus who came to seek and to save what was lost.

On this Reformation Sunday, when we return to our roots and say we are saved by grace through faith, are we ready to live into the fullness of this grace? Ephesians 2 proclaims that it is by grace we have been saved. But no sooner do we hear this good news, that by God's grace we have been included in the family photo, then we find out Jesus Christ has torn down every dividing wall of hostility. That means there is nothing keeping others from experiencing that same grace. The walls are torn down, the doors and windows are wide open. Ephesians three envelopes us in the broad embrace of God's love, praying that we might be able to grasp just how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, even as we are told it is a love that surpasses knowledge. As this all embracing love draws people into the circle of God's grace, chapter four speaks of unity. We all climb into the picture, we all belong, and we are all part of one Body. Now that we are all thrust into the same frame, we are challenged to, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope, when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." (Ephesians 4:3-6)

Instead of muttering when Jesus calls Zacchaeus a son of Abraham, let us rejoice with the angels in heaven that one sinner has repented. When Zacchaeus climbs down from tree and leaps into the family photo, let us remember what it was like when we heard we were included, when God called our name, when God touched our brokenness, when God forgave our sin, when God healed our wounds and bandaged our hurts, when God grabbed us in his warm embrace and said, "You are my beloved child. You belong to me. You belong to my family." For it is the gospel truth, we have all been saved by grace, through faith. Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

Grace alone and faith alone tell us the wonderful gift of God's love. Our works, our merit, our wealth, and our worth have nothing to do with the gift. God gives it freely. Because of that, this man named Zacchaeus presents us a compelling case study in how faith works in our lives. Faith literally re-forms the picture of who is included in God's love, it re-forms that picture in ways that are surprising, expansive, gracious, generous, and inclusive. See how wide and long and deep and high is the love of God. Now when we look at Zacchaeus, we see that faith also re-forms our lives. We do become different people. We change. We become new creations in Christ Jesus. This despised tax collector literally has a change of heart when he meets Jesus, when grace fills his life, when he begins to live by faith. The change is dramatic. "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." Zacchaeus might as well say, "I'm a different man. I have different values. I have different commitments. I have different passions. I have different loyalties."

What happens in the life of Zacchaeus fits perfectly into the saved by grace through faith that we find in Ephesians. Zacchaeus is saved by grace through faith. The walls are torn down and he is able to take his place in the photo, to take his place in the family. He begins to grasp not all, but certainly some of the love of God that is higher and deeper and longer and wider than we can ever imagine. How do we ever live into the fullness of this grace? We begin to live by faith in God. Ephesians four begins with a great word of exhortation. "I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you received." You who have been saved by grace through faith, I urge you to live a life worthy of your calling. What does that look like? Paul firmly places each one who has been saved by grace in the Body of Christ, and then he says as your lives have been filled with God's grace, use the gifts God has given you to build up the Body of Christ.

Zacchaeus was saved by grace through faith and his life immediately changed. Gone were the days of taking advantage of others, of cheating others. He set out to repair and restore what he had broken and damaged. Might each one of us, who have been saved by grace through faith, find ourselves doing that very thing. We get plopped right into the middle of God's big family photo, and we are surrounded with other people who are part of the same family. What should we do now that we have been saved by grace through faith?

On the Day of Pentecost thousands of people were saved by grace through faith. And they said, “What should we do now?” Well, there was baptism of course. And then we find them changing their lives in ways that led to an amazing sense of belonging and community. “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continue to meet together in the temple courts. They broke break in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” (Acts 2:42-47) When we are thrust together in this great and glorious family photo, we really are brothers and sisters. We all turn our hearts to Christ Jesus. We are devoted to the scriptures and prayer and worship and fellowship. Together we grow closer to Christ. That is the life of faith. Together we grow closer to one another, through opening our homes, gathering together, sharing and caring for one another. That is the life of faith. And while Acts shows that when the church lives as the church people are attracted to the light, that the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved (by grace through faith), we don’t want to forget what Jesus was all about.

The story ends not when Zacchaeus climbs down from that sycamore tree. The story ends not when Zacchaeus rushes to his house and welcomes Jesus into his home. The story ends not when Zacchaeus makes his dramatic change, promising to give away half of his possessions and pay back those he wronged four times. The story doesn’t even end when Jesus says salvation has come to the home of Zacchaeus that very day, nor when Jesus grabs Zacchaeus by the shoulder and says you are a son of Abraham, now get in this picture. And smile. Nah, he didn’t have to tell him to smile, did he. That old tax collector must have been grinning from ear to ear. But the story doesn’t end with the family photo, in which Zacchaeus is now included. No, the story ends with this. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Beloved Son of God, says, “The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”

I believe his words say to all of us who have been brought into this great family photo, all of us who have been saved by grace through faith, all of us who belong, all of us who have found our place, I believe his words say to us, “The job is not done.” Who is not in the photo? Ah, you can’t force them to be in the photo. You can’t corral them or coerce them. You can’t cajole them. But you can seek them out. You can never stop reaching out to them, with love, with kindness, with concern, with compassion, and with prayers. We have a Lord who said he is moving furniture and lifting rugs and crawling on the floor to find one lost coin. We have a Lord who said he is out in the fields early in the morning and late into

the night, calling and crying out to find one lost lamb. We have a Lord who is climbing a tree to find Zacchaeus and stopping by a well to befriend a Samaritan woman. We have a Lord who is not only watching and waiting for prodigal sons and daughters to come home, he is sacrificing his very life so that we who are lost will be found. We have a Lord who climbed up on a cross so that through his death and resurrection people like you and me, the least, the last, and the lost, would know we have been saved, we have been found, we have been rescued, and we belong. The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost. Because of that we who have been found are compelled to spend every last bit of our energy hoping and praying and reaching and seeking for the sole purpose that others would find themselves in this photo, in this family, and ultimately in the arms of God's love.

In honor of our Lord who came to seek and to save the lost, so that we might be saved by grace through faith, I want to leave you with a story about a family photo. The family was the church we served in Sacramento. We were no longer at the church, having left many years before. But it happened that our former church had a homecoming. The church had an intern program that must have trained at least a hundred college students, giving them exposure to ministry. That intern program was a source of great blessing to the church, and there was a great deal of pride in that program. So when they invited all the interns back, when they had a homecoming for all the interns, it was a day of celebration. The pastor who led that intern program for many years was named Bill Steele. Bill Steele stood up. He reminded the church that over the years they had helped to raise up many men and women who went to seminary and later served in the church. Then he invited all those who had gone to seminary to come forward. For the purposes of my sermon, I'm going to pretend they all came forward for a family photo. A good crowd came forward. They squished and squeezed until everyone could be seen. But Bill Steele knew something was not right. Someone had not come forward. There was a man there who had become a pastor, but then had trouble in ministry. He had an affair. He was broken and ashamed. And so he did not come forward. He felt like he had no place in the family tree. He imagined he didn't belong in the family photo. He felt like his name didn't deserve to be in the family history. He felt like he was the sinner who had failed. Bill Steele would have none of that. He looked around until he found that man. He looked him in the eye. And then he said, "You get up here. You belong. You are part of this family." You know, maybe some people muttered that day. Maybe some people grumbled. Then again, maybe not. Maybe everyone else in that family photo, maybe everyone else in that sanctuary, knew the truth, and it was a truth that was not just for one man who had sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. It is a truth that is for all of us. We have been saved by grace. We have all been saved by God's amazing grace. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound. It saved a wretch like me. Hallelujah! Thanks be to God.