

[Jesus] entered Jericho and was passing through it. ²A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. ⁴So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. ⁵When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.” ⁶So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. ⁷All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” ⁸Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.” ⁹Then Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God

After last week’s dramatic reading, and today’s children’s moment, I really think we’re on to something! For someone to, maybe, climb a ladder that was disguised as a tree? For the crowd to grumble and point at Zacchaeus and call him a sinner. For Jesus to walk in and say, “Come down! I’m going to dinner with you!” I bet you were after last week’s performance and then the children today! We really can put on some dramatic scenes!

Well, for our story, you’ll just have to use your imagination. Think of it. The town of Jericho is buzzing because Jesus is heading their way. Jesus has been preaching and performing miracles for about 3 years at this point. His reputation precedes him. The people are excited. Zacchaeus is, too. They’re all coming out to see him. But Zacchaeus’ reputation precedes him, as well. Zacchaeus is not just a guy that people don’t like. He’s working for the Roman government; he is the *chief* of the tax collectors. A Jew who takes money from the Jews and gives it to the occupying force of Rome, and he’s rich. Really rich. The general public just doesn’t have a lot of empathy for the ultra-wealthy.

Just take a moment and imagine if someone in our community, one of us, were to take a job for a government that you felt threatened by - if a neighbor worked for a political body that sent armed troops into cities and towns and enforced laws that you morally didn't agree with. And imagine if that guy was getting rich from his government contract. He would not be well liked. He'd be an outcast among his own people. Someone like the Sheriff of Nottingham in the Robin Hood tale.

That's how the people of Jericho felt about Zaccheus.

So, despite his great wealth, where normally, people would make space for you in public, Zacchaeus is not given any deferential treatment. When Jesus arrives and Zacchaeus wants to catch a glimpse, his neighbors do not care. They do not make a path for him or give him a spot at the front.

So, he does something quite unusual. I'm not sure how common it was in the first century for a grown man to climb a tree, much less a wealthy chief of tax collectors, but let me ask you this, when was the last time *you* climbed a tree?

When Jesus called him by name and spent time with him, Zacchaeus repented and changed his whole life. He gave away half his income and promised to do even more to those who were treated unfairly. It's such a good redemption story, isn't it?

Jesus seeing the potential of one who is reviled. Zacchaeus seeing Jesus as his savior and responding to his love. It's fantastic.

And as I've said before several times recently, maybe that's the whole story. Maybe it's time for communion, . . . but . . . what if we've been reading it wrong all this time? What if Zacchaeus isn't saying what we think he's saying and Jesus isn't declaring what we think he's declaring?

I mean, to be fair, Jesus spoke Aramaic and then it was written in Greek and then translated into Latin and then into English. And none of those languages are easy to understand. You know, there's this saying that people use when they can't understand something. They say, "It's Greek to me."

But you're in luck, because when you got me, you also got someone who thinks Greek is hard. We're in the same boat there. But I, unlike most of you, have been required to take a year of Greek.

So let me share with you something you might not have heard before from a pulpit. Scholars, preachers, theologians, you good, faithful, Bible-lovin' people, none of us know exactly what Zacchaeus meant when he spoke about his income and giving it away. None of us. Because there's one word we just don't know how to translate.

In the original Greek, Zacchaeus says, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I give to the poor." Give. In the oldest manuscripts we have, "give" - written in a verb tense that is present/indicative/action. Present. Indicative. Action. The word is DEE-do-mi. DEE-do-mi means I give. Not DEE-dos - I will give - future tense. For most of history, people have read it as I will give, but it is entirely plausible that Zacchaeus was not announcing a new philanthropic foundation - I *will* start doing this - but maybe, just maybe, he's telling Jesus what he has already been doing. I give half. This is plausible. Not certain because Greek verbs are tricky, but plausible.

It is ambiguous enough to have confused translators for centuries. The King James, American Standard Version, Common English Version, and the Message translation all say, "I give." Present tense. The pew Bible at our church and the Living Bible, for example, say "I will give."

This single verb makes a huge difference to me in how we interpret the text, and since we have had both verb tenses for so long, it's not on us to decisive choice about which is correct. We need to look at both. It's all about how the text speaks to us.

What I mean is, growing up, I was taught theologically that a person had to have a moment of salvation - a conscientious choice to repent from sin, invite Jesus into your heart, and change your ways in order to be saved.

So, growing up, this story was presented to me as a great example of how a sinful person literally got to have Jesus come into his house and then spiritually into his heart and he made a decision that day to change his ways and give his wealth, which was gained by "corrupt practice," to the poor. It was a great salvation story. Jesus

literally says, “Today salvation has come to this house.” It makes perfect sense to read the story in this way. Having committed our lives to Jesus, we *will* give. We *will* respond to the presence and call of our Lord and Savior.

But if we read the verb as a present indicative action, then Zacchaeus is already doing those extraordinary things to help the poor with his wealth. If he’s already doing it, what could Jesus mean when he declares that “Today salvation has come to this house because, he too, is a son of Abraham.”? If Zacchaeus hasn’t changed, then what has?

Listen to how it sounds in the Message translation. It says, “When Jesus got to the tree, he looked up and said, ‘Zacchaeus, hurry down. Today is my day to be a guest in your home.’ Zacchaeus scrambled out of the tree, hardly believing his good luck, delighted to take Jesus home with him. Everyone who saw the incident was indignant and grumped, ‘What business does he have getting cozy with this crook?’

Zacchaeus just stood there, a little stunned. He stammered apologetically, ‘Master, I give away half my income to the poor—and if I’m caught cheating, I pay four times the damages.’ Jesus said, ‘Today is salvation day in this home! Here he is: Zacchaeus, son of Abraham! For the Son of Man came to find and restore the lost.’”

When you hear it that way, you hear that what changes is the community. If Zacchaeus is giving half of his income to the poor and watching out for those being defrauded, if he takes responsibility for accusations of cheating, then he does not deserve the bad reputation he has in his community. In his faith and his action, despite the fact that he works for the Romans, he should still be in, not out. He is a child of God, a son of Abraham, not an outcast. It’s the restoration of the family of God that Jesus declares. When he says, salvation has come to this house, this is a child of Abraham, and I have come to save the lost, it is a declaration that Zacchaeus should still be considered a part of the community, should still belong to his friends and family, should be included, not excluded.

You ever wonder why Jesus chose Zacchaeus? Why the outcast when, I imagine, there were two dozen other people asking him to be their guest for the night? In seeking out Zacchaeus, Jesus might just be reminding us that we are called to care

for one another, keep one another in love, to stop labeling people for what they do or what they wear and see their hearts. To restore the lost to the fold. To seek out the Zacchaeus-es ourselves.

Jesus did not call Zacchaeus to give all he has to the poor. He blesses what Zacchaeus is doing. He does not call Zacchaeus to quit his job. I would imagine that Zacchaeus remained the chief tax collector and kept giving to the poor. But what I don't know is whether or not the community heeded Jesus' call to restore him into their lives.

. . . Today, our church wraps up stewardship season, in which we're asked to pray and think about what we think we will be giving to the church for the next calendar year. We've had four, no five, people speak about why it's important for us to write down our estimated giving – for the budgeting process, to pay staff, to keep the building running, to buy food and curriculum and give to our community and those in need. It's not an easy thing to talk about money at church. I wish we didn't have to do it, but it's a necessity.

I wish we could give half of what we receive to the poor, to those who are truly vulnerable. I do. You know that the reality is that a large bulk of it is used for salaries and building expenses. But I also know we give so much more than our budget and these investment cards show. Our church budget doesn't capture the giving you do for the mittens and coats that are donated in the winter, the food you buy or make for the WARM Shelter and Jonnycake Center, the heating oil and rent assistance that is provided through book sale funds and the deacons funds. What we bring in at the Bazaar is not reflected in these cards. And I know each of you feel compelled to give to other non-profits besides the church. I know you care.

And I know you've heard that with the government shutdown and cuts to federal funding, many, many Americans will be unable to pay their bills and buy groceries. On Friday, a federal judge right here in Rhode Island issued an order that the government use the contingency funds to fund SNAP, but even if the government agrees, the contingency fees will not be enough. Others say that there are funds available in other places, but just as no one understood what Zacchaeus said two thousand years ago, no one understands what will happen to SNAP in the next 48 hours, so, bottom line, things

are still precarious for a huge percentage of our neighbors. And do you know who will be there to step up if government assistance falls away? Faith communities. Faith communities will have to fill the gap, because there is no other option than to care for the poor.

Jesus says to Zacchaeus, in front of the whole town of Jericho, salvation is yours, you are a child of God. Maybe because of what you have chosen today. Or maybe because of what you have been doing for a while already.

And Jesus says to the community, care for the poor is evidence of salvation and faithfulness. You cannot exclude from the family of God those who care for the vulnerable. You cannot call a sinner those who give, not because you can donate your way to heaven but because it's the morally right thing to do to love God and love your neighbor as yourself.

If Zacchaeus has been giving to the poor, and the community still shuns him, then Jesus says, "No more." Faith, salvation, redemption – these are all intertwined. And so are giving, serving, and belonging. You cannot be selfish and redeemed. You cannot have faith without service. You cannot be saved and still exile from the community a sibling in faith because of his job.

Rev. Dr. Eric Barreto says, "Thus, the ending of the story is not about a conversion of an individual but a shift in how he is perceived by his neighbors and the reader alike. . . And thus, the "lost" whom Jesus has come to save is not just a Zacchaeus excluded and marginalized because of communal perceptions of his wealth and profession, but a whole community fractured by his absence. That is, it is not just Zacchaeus who is [saved], but his household and the whole of Jericho as well."

There's a lot more to this story than I realized as a child. But whether you say DEE-do-mi or DEE-dos, you still have to look yourself in the mirror and ask, am I giving, serving, and belonging to a family of God that is diverse in our theology and occupations but united in our care for the poor? About 45 million Americans are missing either food assistance or paychecks because of the shutdown as of today. And when God sees us, it's not the size of our bank accounts that is the litmus test of our faith. It's

not our jobs and which political party we're affiliated with that's the litmus test. What the Bible keeps saying over and over is it's how we care for the poor that is a litmus test for everything else. So, let's do what we can, however we can, as much as we can. Amen.