

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church Des Moines, WA September 25, 2016

Luke 19:1-10

Called from More than a Tree

Hymns: 235 – 353

All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—² for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. ³ This is good, and pleases God our Savior, ⁴ who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. ⁵ For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, ⁶ who gave himself as a ransom for all men—the testimony given in its proper time. ⁷ And for this purpose I was appointed a herald and an apostle—I am telling the truth, I am not lying—and a teacher of the true faith to the Gentiles.

**⁸ I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing.
(Luke 19:1-10)**

Zacchaeus – Just as I said to the children, if you know the name, it's probably because of that same song which playfully tells the story of Jesus' encounter with the vertically-challenged guy just trying to get a view. Zacchaeus is most often remembered and viewed as a children's Bible story – a good-natured, somewhat silly story at that. The diminutive dude hanging out in the tree until Jesus spots him and joyfully calls him out while the crowd around has a good chuckle as the short little guy comes down. Zacchaeus – what a funny, little story about a funny, little guy.

But oh how our cute child-hood tales often paint a prettier picture than reality.

Today, I'd like to introduce you to the real Zacchaeus, and he is a far cry from the cute, little guy we probably picture as we sing that silly song. The real Zacchaeus was no good; he was a crook, a cheat, some would even call him a traitor. As a tax collector employed by the Roman government, Zacchaeus was already hated by his fellow countrymen for his

allegiance to Israel's tormentor. But there would've been added animosity since tax collectors typically found ways to line their own pockets through excess taxes and fees. A man like Zacchaeus, who had risen to chief tax collector in the important commercial city of Jericho, wouldn't have done so while holding on to any cordial personal relationships. In an Israelite's eyes, Zacchaeus was the sleaze who schemed your grandma and went away snickering as he counted the cash he had stolen from her. And so Zacchaeus wasn't up in that tree solely because he was short; he was there because he had undoubtedly been pushed to the back by people who hated him and who told him he had no place in this crowd that wanted to see Jesus. He had probably made his way up into that tree amidst jeers and taunts. And if any of his fellow citizens saw him up there, they were probably hoping that he would fall to his harm rather than catch a view of Jesus.

And Zacchaeus wasn't just the scorn of his fellow countrymen. His heart, his attitude, his actions had also made him an enemy of God; Zacchaeus was a man who had death and hell in his future. That's the reality of where Zacchaeus and his chosen path in life were taking him. And there's nothing playful, cute, or funny about it.

That is the real Zacchaeus, yet often we cast him as this mischievous, playful character in children's song and story. Why the miscast? Our view of Zacchaeus really reflects the attitude which we often hold toward sin in general.

When it comes to many sins in our lives, and today I'm thinking mostly of what we would call "lesser" sins, we often minimize those sins and their effects. We have an amazing ability to downplay what they do to us. So often, just like we do with Zacchaeus, we try to change the narrative when it comes to sin. We shrug that sin away, we laugh this sin off, we say that's really no big deal. Those sins aren't that harmful, this one is more bad habit than actual sin, and that sin is more likely to be the butt of a joke than a scourge in our lives.

And we especially do that with our kids and their sinful behavior! How often haven't we laughed off a child's misbehavior? Or excused their rebellion because "kids will be kids." Or we might shake our heads with a smile when we know we should actually correct and rebuke. And "it's just too cute" when they do that one thing that they shouldn't be doing, so I just can't bring myself to discipline them for it.

It's pretty easy to change the narrative on sin, isn't it? And it's pretty common that we do just that!

But the perspective that we often put over the lens as we view our lives doesn't tell the real story, it doesn't give an accurate representation of what's truly present in our lives. Just as a silly child's song might cause us to miss the real ugliness that was in

Zacchaeus' life, it can also keep us from seeing the reality of what every sin, even the "little sin", even the "funny sin", even the "cute sin" – does to us.

Our sins are serious and they are ugly. And every sin, no matter how we might see it, is viewed by our perfect God as egregious failure. It's why he had James write, ***"Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it."*** (Jas 2:10). There aren't any little sins, or minor sins, or harmless sins from God's perspective.

And the trouble for all of us in that is that God also lays out clearly in his Word what any sin does to us. Our sin makes us hostile to God, our sin leads to physical death; our sin ends in eternal condemnation in hell. And there's nothing playful, cute, or funny about that.

It was smack dab into the ugliness of sin that Jesus came when he was passing through Jericho that day.

And into this ugly situation, Jesus brought something that was missing – he brought the love of God. And as Jesus beckoned Zacchaeus, he was calling him down from much more than a tree, he was calling him from a life of sin. As Jesus spoke to Zacchaeus, he was not just saying, "I'm coming to your house," he was also saying, "I'm coming into your life." And that life would never be the same. As his sin was confronted by Jesus, it was also forgiven by Jesus. And that forgiveness changed Zacchaeus outlook completely

And it did so immediately. Luke tells us, ***"But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, '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.'"*** (Lk 19:8). Knowing the grace of God moved this rotten sinner to change the way he lived. And knowing the grace of God changed how God viewed this man. Listen to what Jesus said, ***"Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."*** (Lk 19:9-10). No longer a sinner, he was saved; no longer lost, he was sought and found!

And that is why it is so important that we see and know the real Zacchaeus – the ugly, sinful Zacchaeus – because it also allows us to see the greatness of God's grace!

In the same way that Jesus came to the real Zacchaeus, so he also comes into our lives. And Jesus does not come, searching for perfect people who have their lives all together. It is into real lives that he comes, lives that are filled with ugly sins and their consequences; lives that would cause others to shake their heads and disapprove. And how important that we see that, because it allows us to see the truly special and unique blessing that Jesus brings into our lives – his love. Without recognizing our sin and its

seriousness, we cannot marvel when God's grace shows up in our lives.

And in that love, he comes and he first calls us from our place of sin. As we think about Jesus coming into our lives, we must be clear: Jesus does not come shrugging our sins away or innocently excusing them or laughing them off. Confronting sin and calling sinners away from it is always the first step for Jesus. So, as you think about your own life, what "tree" – what sin – would Jesus call you down from?

Whatever it is, Jesus calls you from that sin for the same reason that he called Zacchaeus down from that tree. In love, He wants to change your life with the forgiveness that he came to give all people in this world. Forgiveness that was accomplished through Jesus' perfect life and sacrificial death on the cross. It is only by seeing the real ugliness and effects of sin that we can marvel at the grace of God that is present when Jesus calls us from sin to the forgiveness that he gives.

And having been called from sin and having been given forgiveness and salvation, Jesus claims a place in our lives. And when Jesus arrives in a person's life, that life is never the same. In lives where Jesus dwells with his love and forgiveness, Jesus also empowers change. For Zacchaeus, it was to an honest life of restitution that Jesus called him, what will it be for you as Jesus comes to your house after calling you down from the tree? Because Jesus doesn't call us from our sin to give forgiveness so that we just return back to our sin. He calls us from our sin to change. He calls us to live for him.

We do have it right when it comes to Zacchaeus. His story is one of the greatest and most memorable in the Bible. But not just because it is a funny story with a catchy song about a funny little man. Zacchaeus is one of the great stories of the Bible because it is a story about sin and grace. It is a story about Jesus coming to seek and to save the lost. May that story be the story of every one of us in our lives as well. Our sin is serious, but the grace of God that brings forgiveness through Jesus makes our story great! Amen.