

“Sharing a Meal With a Neighbor”

Luke 19: 1-10

This week, we continue discovering just who our neighbor is by taking a look at the Zacchaeus story. Just a little background and context for our reading: This story is only found in the Gospel of Luke and is considered a conflict story. It is the last of Jesus’ encounters with someone who is considered an outcast before his entry into Jerusalem.

I’m sure as I began to read the first few verses, some of us were already singing “Zacchaeus was a wee little man and a wee little man was he.” Okay maybe not out loud but we certainly had the tune going through our heads.

That being said, I’m sure as I read the first few lines, we thought to ourselves that we already know how this story will end. We have heard it so many times before. But as I have lived with this text this past week, I have come to realize that there is more to this story than what we perceive at our first initial glance, more than our assumptions about what we think we know. Sure it has a fun, catchy song, but what does it teach us about God? What is the message that Luke is trying to get across to us?

Let’s face it: we all have assumptions and preconceived notions about what this text is really about. And because of these, the preacher has the hard task of

saying something new: something new about grace, something new about Jesus, something new about hospitality.

However, our assumptions and preconceived notions about this text make us fall into a trap. We begin to force this text to do something it was never intended to do. By doing so, we don't listen. We don't hear what this text is really saying to us as people of faith. We just assume we know.

But as I am always reminded...we know what happens when we assume things. We make an...I'll let you fill in the blank.

The simple truth is that this text is about how our preconceived notions cloud our vision, how our assumptions about others, even assumptions about ourselves prevent us from seeing each other as a person God created in the image of God, can prevent us from seeing that "other" person as someone who has been named and claimed as God's very own.

Let me explain: Luke is a story-teller at heart. He likes to keep us on our toes. He has told us from the very beginning of his Gospel that things are not always what they seem... a baby born in a stable is proclaimed by the heavenly chorus of angels to be the Son of God; a young woman sings a song which prophesizes the coming of the Kingdom of God, ushering in a time when the rich will be made poor and the poor made rich. Luke tells us of a young man from Nazareth aka the middle of nowhere who is here to proclaim the Kingdom of God.

This man, this Jesus will turn our world upside down in unexpected and glorious ways. So, when we come upon this story of Zacchaeus, we shouldn't be too surprised that once again, through his mastery story-telling, Luke is shattering all our assumptions.

Luke has told us from the very beginning that things are not always what they seem. They are not always what we assume. Things are not always what they appear to be, especially when we, the readers of this upside down world turning narrative, are so quick to jump to conclusions.

Case in point: In verse 3, we are told that "he is short in stature". We all assume this refers to Zacchaeus. After all, we like to sing "Zacchaeus was a wee little man". But this phrase "he is short in stature" could be referring to Jesus. Both the Greek text as well as the English translation permit this. (Mind Blown, right?)

Second, we are told that Zacchaeus was a tax collector. Not only that, we are told he is the chief tax collector. Once again, we all assume we know what this means. All the criticism which can be hurled against Zacchaeus comes to our minds. He is a cheat. He is politically treasonous for going against his very own people to serve the Romans. He is ceremoniously unclean. We assume that Zacchaeus is someone who should be avoided at all cost. However the reality is that Luke made up this term. There was no chief (meaning head of) the tax collectors. There were only regular (all on the same level) tax collectors. And if

that wasn't enough to turn our world upside down, Luke goes one step farther in shattering our assumptions about this tax collector. We discover that Zacchaeus' very name means "innocent" or "righteous". (Mind Blown again, right?) Again, Zacchaeus is not what we assume him to be.

And lastly, verse 8...This verse has been causing problems for translators and people of faith for years. We all assume that it reads, "Zacchaeus 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." But in reality, the verbs used in the Greek are present tense. It should be translated as: "Look, Lord, I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone, I repay them four times as much."

So if the verbs are present tense, why is verse 8 translated in future tense? Well, this is where I'm going to get a little Bible nerdy on us. "This is a case, as Greek grammar scholars contend, of a "future present tense" – that is, while it may look like the present it's really about the future. Sounds good? Well, it might, except that this story of Zacchaeus is the only place in the Bible – or in any other literature written in Greek! – where this "future present tense" occurs. And you know what that means? It means that those grammarians made it up." (Mind Blown times three, right?) (David Lose)

Okay so now that I have destroyed everyone's foundations of faith at least when it comes to Zacchaeus and what we may have been taught in Sunday School and Vacation Bible School all those years ago, I want to remind everyone that, like I said, Luke is a master story-teller. In this story and yes in all stories before this one, and all the stories after this one, Luke has been playing on our assumptions. He has been setting us up to realize that all is not what it seems...especially when it comes to the one called Jesus of Nazareth. He is certainly not what the people expected. They expected the Son of God to be a King. They expected the Son of God to be powerful and mighty. They expected the Son of God to break bread with the rulers and heads of state.

But Luke tells us time and time again, the Son of God instead welcomed the little children. The Son of God broke bread with sinners and tax-collectors. Time and time, Luke has told us that the Son of God came not to overtake the world but to save the lost.

When it comes to Jesus, everyone assumed they knew who he was. He was a lowly carpenter from Galilee, a nobody really. No one expected him to be the Son of God. And to go one step farther, when it came to God's story of grace and love, everyone also assumed they knew how it would end....someone riding into Jerusalem on a mighty steed, someone overthrowing the Romans. What they didn't

expect was what actually happened. Who would have imagined that instead of what they assumed to be true, the story of God's love and grace actually began with a baby being born in a stable to an unwed mother. It continued with a man riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. It reached its pentacle with a man dying on a cross like a common criminal. And really who would have guessed that the story of God's grace and love would actually have a surprise ending...a celebration of an empty grave and the gift of new life through the resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ?

Just like he does through his whole Gospel, in this story about Zacchaeus, Luke is challenging us to see beyond the surface, to see beyond our assumptions. He wants us to really see our community, to see our neighbor like Jesus does, to see how God is at work in unexpected, life-giving ways, to see how God is at work through people, people we assumed we knew. Luke is challenging us to put aside our preconceived notions, to put aside our assumptions and to truly see the person standing before, sitting next to us, the person that we are called to be in relationship with as our neighbor. Luke wants us to see beyond all our assumptions of "other" people, to even see beyond the assumptions we hold about ourselves, Luke wants us to see that all of us, from the lowest person living on the streets to the highest official we know, all of us are first and foremost a Beloved Child of God.

Or let me say it this way...Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood has this wonderfully weird episode about Josephine the short neck giraffe. Basically, Josephine wants to change her neck, to make it grow long so that she could become what she assumes is a "normal" giraffe. Long story short...through the meeting of dancing elephants and snakes which can't hiss, Josephine comes to accept her short neck.

The lesson might have ended there. But Fred Rogers does something brilliant. After this story, he looks right into the camera and speaks to the broken and hurt person in all of us. He offers words of kindness which nourish us, creating ripple effects. He shows us how one kind empathetic word has a wonderful way of turning into many, making the circle wide so that all will know they are welcome at the Table.

(Watch)

Fred Rogers understood something that we as the wider church tend to forget. Grace isn't about forgiveness or repentance. Grace is about seeing the other person, seeing ourselves for who God created us to be.

Grace came to Zacchaeus that day because Jesus saw him for who God created him to be. Jesus saw Zacchaeus for who he really was. Jesus saw Zacchaeus as a child of God, beloved, forgiven and free. And in that moment, the Kingdom of God came near.

In that moment, when God's grace opened everyone's eyes, opens everyone's hearts, an invitation was extended, an invitation to see beyond all the perceptions and assumptions which separate and divide, which hurt and destroy. In that moment, when God's grace opens our eyes, all our assumptions and preconceived notions are broken down and then and only then can we truly see God at work in our world.

You see, God's grace is a force which is powerful enough to shatter all our assumptions, to shatter all our preconceived notions. It is a force that is powerful enough and loving enough to claim us and name as God's own. It is a force powerful enough to show us, to remind us that God is still at work in this world bringing healing and wholeness to all, no matter what others may assume.

So knowing that, today and all days, may we never assume we know how the story will end but rather may we always have the courage see the world through the eyes of God, knowing that God's grace meets us in unexpected and life changing ways as we extend the invitation to all to be our neighbor. Amen.