

“Zacchaeus”

Luke 19: 1-10

This week, we continue our journey through the Gospel of Luke. We have finally come to the point on Jesus' journey to Jerusalem where he is almost to the city's gates. At the end of this particular chapter, Jesus rides into the city of Jerusalem where the crowd will proclaim him King of Kings. But that moment is still to come.

For now, this week, we are still in this here but not yet feeling of time. We are close to Jerusalem but still have a ways to go until we enter into the gates of that city. We as readers of the Gospel of Luke aren't there yet. We aren't ready for the arrival of the Kingdom of God. We still have a few more things to learn, a few more things to see, a few more things to understand before we are ready to proclaim Jesus King of Kings.

So we continue our journey of transformation. We continue making our way towards becoming the people God has created us to be. And as we continue making this journey, a journey to embracing our call as disciples, we come upon a very familiar story, the story of Zacchaeus. This story is only found in the Gospel of Luke and is considered a conflict story.

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.

As we continue our journey of transformation, we come to this very familiar story. We read the first few lines and already know how the story will end. Or at least we think we do.

But as I have lived with this text this past week, I have come to realize that there is more to this story than 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.

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. And by doing so, we don't listen or 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 can 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 that prophesizes the coming of the Kingdom of God, 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 is here to proclaim the Kingdom of God and 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, he 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 translations 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 that could 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 and 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 tax collectors. We discover that Zacchaeus' very name means “innocent” or “righteous”. (Mind Blown again, right?) 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. Sound 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, he 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. 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 with actually have a surprise ending with the celebration of an empty grave and the gift of new life through the resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ?

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 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, 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.

Once we get that, then and only then are we ready to enter the gates of Jerusalem and proclaim Jesus King of Kings, to proclaim him Son of God.

Because you see, salvation came to Zacchaeus that day. It didn't come for him because he was worthy. It didn't come because he was unworthy. It certainly didn't come because Zacchaeus was one of “those” people who really need it. In fact, repentance and Forgiveness are never mentioned in this story. We just assume it is there.

Here is what I want everyone to hear: Salvation 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, grace happened for Zacchaeus and the crowd. There were no rules, no regulations, just a life-transforming, a life-affirming moment

when one is accepted and welcomed simply because he is a child of God. All eyes were opened to the amazing life giving transformation of God's grace at work in our lives.

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 that separate and divide, that 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, bringing healing and wholeness to all of God's children.

In that moment of grace, an invitation comes for all, for you, for me, for Zacchaeus, for all of us to be seen for who we really are: a child of God, made in the image of God, beloved, claimed and named.

I ran across a story this week written by a substance abuse counselor. She called it her moment of truth, the moment when her eyes were opened beyond her cynical stare of the system to the beauty of love that is still at work in this world.

She begins her story by saying that she had just left church but it wasn't in the sanctuary where she encountered Christ. She encountered Christ through the kindness of a young man who saw the drug user to actually see a child of God.

The counselor admits that when she first saw the drug user, all she could see where the tremors, the shakes, the signs of the need for the next fix. She assumed

she thought she knew all about this young man. He was a drug user. He would probably steal money to get his next fix. He would probably tell some story about how he needed money for food when in reality it would just go to buy more drugs. But “As I was getting out of my car, a man in his 30s wearing a baseball cap and Carhartt jacket walked right up to this other young man, this other young man with an unruly beard and torn heavily-soiled jeans sitting under a partial awning and asked — with the ease of someone asking a loved one how their day had gone — if he could use a refill for the empty coffee cup that was held close against his sunken chest.

The young man looked surprised at first and stood there for several silent seconds before deciding to follow this stranger into the store to take him up on his offer. I followed them both inside and looked on from an inconspicuous corner as the disheveled, disoriented young man tried to keep his shaking hand steady enough to refill his small styrofoam coffee cup. I wondered if the other man could see in that trembling hand what I saw. I wondered if being a substance abuse counselor had made me cynical.

The other young man tried his best to not let the shaking spill the coffee on his hand as he walked toward the counter. The man in the Carhartt jacket, who had watched patiently from a far enough distance to not add self-consciousness and shame to the young man’s obvious struggle to refill his cup, intercepted him before

he reached the counter. He gently took the side-splashing cup of coffee from his hand and directed his attention away from the counter and back to the whole of the convenience store. He made a broad, sweeping motion to encompass all the aisles and said, “Get whatever you want.”

The young man again stood in stunned silence before making his way to the perpetually rotating rollers of the hot dog where he loaded up a single hot dog with all the free fixings. He deliberated for a long while as he made his way up and down the many rows before selecting one snack-sized bag of Doritos to go along with his small coffee refill and \$1.29 hot dog.

The man in the cap helped him place the items on the counter and asked if he wanted anything else. The young man shook his head no.

And here is where grace happened for both the young men but most importantly for the substance abuse counselor. She says, “As I backed out of my parking spot I could see, for the first time, I saw beyond the shakes and signs of the need for the next fix, and instead I saw what looked like the beginnings of a smile on the young man’s face. It was more beautiful than anything I’d seen in the cathedral earlier that night. I realized that I had truly see God that night, in a face, in a person that I first ignored and assumed I knew.”

Salvation comes to all of us because of God’s grace. It is a force that 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. Salvation comes to Zacchaeus and to all of us because God is still at work in this world bringing healing and wholeness to all.

So today and all days, may we not always assume we know how the story will end but rather may we have the courage see the world through the eyes of God's and know that God's grace will meet us in unexpected and life changing ways. Amen.