

Luke 19:1-10 Common English Bible (CEB)

19 Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through town. **2** A man there named Zacchaeus, a ruler among tax collectors, was rich. **3** He was trying to see who Jesus was, but, being a short man, he couldn't because of the crowd. **4** So he ran ahead and climbed up a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus, who was about to pass that way. **5** When Jesus came to that spot, he looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, come down at once. I must stay in your home today." **6** So Zacchaeus came down at once, happy to welcome Jesus.

7 Everyone who saw this grumbled, saying, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."

8 Zacchaeus stopped and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord, I give half of my possessions to the poor. And *if I have cheated* anyone, I repay them four times as much."

9 Jesus said to him, "Today, salvation has come to this household because he too is a son of Abraham. **10** The Human One[a] came to seek and save the lost."

Childhood was different when I was a kid. I know it was a long long long time ago, but bear with me as I reminisce. When I was a kid: mom sent you out to play after school and all day on Saturday, after you had finished your chores of course. My chores included dusting and vacuuming the house and cleaning my room, and helping with the laundry. It was usually after lunch when I finally hit the great outdoors. Then I was free until dark. Now some kids might have had to be home by the time the street lights came on, but out where I lived there were no street lights. So you just came home when you got hungry or it got dark. My next door neighbors mom had a huge old bell she rang to call her daughter home, usually right at 6:00. And what we did while we were out and about was play. we played long and hard. We had acres and acres of woods to explore. we played pioneer, we played spies, we played hide and seek. We explored swamps, creeks, and ponds. all without adult supervision. Back then it was just called being a kid, today it would be called "Free Range Childhood"

So one day when I was about 8, I was at my friends house, and after lunch her mom sent us out to play. And we came upon a big tree in her woods, which had perfectly placed branches, all the way down the ground. You know the kind of tree that just begs to be climbed. The kind of tree that says, you MUST climb me. And so we did. We scrambled up that tree as fast as we could. And my what a view we had. we played up in that tree for a good long time, until, as is the way of young girls, we got bored and wanted to play something else. It was at that moment when we learned that going up a tree is much easier than coming back down. Suddenly those perfectly spaced branches that had led us up the tree, were really far apart and we were afraid to climb back down. we hollered and yelled and cried a little. But no one came. No one heard. And so we waited. and waited. and waited.... It started to get late, we knew eventually my mom would be coming to pick me up. And I was pretty sure we were gonna be in big trouble for not being back at the house when she arrived. Well, eventually her mom, my mom, her dad, and even her older brothers started looking for us. and they found us. still stuck up in that tree. Her mom tried to coax us down, her brothers climbed up

and tried to pull us down. But we were having none of it. We were holding onto the trunk of that tree with every ounce of strength our little 8 year old girl selves had. Eventually her dad got out the ladder and leaned it up against the trunk of the tree and climbed up and carried us down.

That may have been the last tree I ever climbed.

In today's story Zacchaeus climbs a tree. Zacchaeus was a wee little man, as the Sunday school song tells us, a wee little man was he. I imagine if you were going to do a movie of the Zacchaeus story, Zacchaeus would be played by Danny DiVitto.

Now Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector, so he was at the top of the food chain, of the very corrupt Tax collecting system. The text tells us he was a rich man, and we know, because of the corrupt system he was a part of, that he did not get that wealth, by being fair and honest. That is not the way the system was set up. The system was set up to abuse and burden the poor. The system was set up to keep the lower economic classes indebted to the Roman occupiers and to keep them afraid and impoverished.

Now this wealthy man wants to get a good look at Jesus. And so he climbs up into the tree. Perhaps Zacchaeus has already heard some of the message, Jesus has preached. Perhaps, Zacchaeus is already on the road to transformation. Or perhaps Zacchaeus was the one and only honest and upright tax collector in the land. We don't actually know. What we do know is that while he is up the tree, Jesus notices him, and calls him by name. Zacchaeus- Come down from there, for this day I MUST go to your house. I MUST, not I might, or will, or want to, But I MUST.

Of course, when people hear Jesus proclaim he is going to Zacchaeus' house- they begin to grumble. No matter who you are- even Jesus- you can't please everyone. No matter what you do, some will complain. And so they do. But Zacchaeus isn't having it. He says look, I'm not such a bad guy. I give half of my income to charity. And if I steal from anyone, I repay them 4 times as much as I took. (the standard repayment for theft was anywhere from 20% to 2 times.)

This little speech of Zacchaeus' is interesting, because it is a little tricky to translate. The first issue is that the line translated in English could be "**If** I steal, or **If** I get **caught**." Two rather different meanings. But let's assume the more generous, he repays whatever he has come to know he has stolen, no matter how he comes to know it.

The second interesting point in his speech that the giving to charity, the poor, and the repaying are both in the the Greek progressive present tense, rather than the simple future tense - in other words, it's not just because Jesus is going to his house today that he is coming clean and is going to begin to do these things, but that he **already** is doing these things, giving to the poor and repaying stolen funds. He is going to continue it, but it is a practice already undertaken, before he even encounters Jesus today. Read this way, Zacchaeus is not a so much a sinner saved, as a saint revealed. *The crowd has demonized Zacchaeus based on false information, common*

expectations, rumor, innuendo, and outright lies. But Jesus uncovers the truth about Zacchaeus, and as surely as he knows his name, he knows his true nature. It is important to note that Zacchaeus' giving does not simply represent redistribution, but reparation. It is a form of giving portrayed not as generosity but as justice - of making things right.

And so Jesus takes this opportunity to praise Zacchaeus- salvation has come to this house. That is why Jesus holds him up as a son of Abraham. Once lost but now found. Zacchaeus is a man who despite his profession, pursues justice.

Now, We do not live in a world, devoid of history, rather we live in a world where decisions made generations ago, impact and effect our world continually. Some of these decisions are good, and some not so much. There was a time, not so very long ago, when I was a young woman that a married woman could not have her own credit card. buy a house, or make decisions about her own health and medical care. Times change, we learn from our mistakes, and hopefully we don't make them again. But sometimes just not making them again is not enough. Sometimes we have to change the systems, the laws, and the culture- in order to right the wrongs. Because, when we own up to those mistakes, when we make a sincere effort to change the system, the oppressive system, the system designed to keep some down while lifting others up, when we address these systematic institutional histories of oppression, then, and only then, can we begin the process of healing.

Recently Georgetown University decided to set up special scholarships for, and to actively recruit the descendants of, 272 slaves held by the university who were sold to help pay off debts and keep the university open in 1838. In making this decision the board stated, "Georgetown is morally obligated to adopt restorative measures, which should clearly include a scholarship fund for the descendants of those who were sold to save the institution," This decision came after a thorough study of the issues of reparations by the universities' task force, The Working Group On Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation. While some may say this does not go far enough, and others are concerned with the costs to the university, it is still and none the less a beginning.

There are many different ideas and thoughts as well as sincere feelings surrounding the issue of reparations in this country. But the truth remains that certain systematic practices, such as Slavery, Jim Crow, and Redlining to name a few- have benefitted some while keeping others held down in this country for generations. I do not claim to have the whole solution, but I think we need to have the discussion, openly, honestly, and with grace, so that we can begin the process of healing, and make our country, not "Great Again" but Better than it has ever been. And that I believe is something we can learn from today's lesson- from little Zacchaeus. A wee little man, who stood against the system, and did his best, to live out the love of God in his community. May he be a model for us in our time. Amen.

