

Zacchaeus

Jericho, Province of Palestine – *Our community was rocked today by the news that one of our leading citizens has publicly announced his religious*



Michael Olmsted

transformation after an encounter with the unorthodox Galilean rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth. Various community leaders report that the head of the tax department climbed a tree on the main north-south highway in order to attract the attention of the itinerant teacher, known for associating with the poor and sickly. This Jesus went home with Zacchaeus, where the tax collector loudly proclaimed his newfound faith in God and pledged to give away half his wealth to the poor and repay any perceived overages collected by his office! The full story will be reported in tomorrow's edition.

What happened in Jericho that day would have moved like lightning through the press services of our day. Everything about Zacchaeus' encounter with Jesus is unusual: that it happened, that a Jewish tax collector would give away his wealth, that a rabbi would enter the home of such a person, that God's grace would be displayed so concretely and that there is healing even more amazing than the cleansing of a leper's skin or blind eyes!

Most of us read this story and immediately remember the charming childhood song that begins "Zacchaeus was a wee little man..." But this story is definitely for adults who understand midlife crises, or what it means to face the emptiness of material wealth and success, knowing they are temporary trophies. Luke paints a picture of a man who thinks he has it all until he encounters the grace of God.

Jericho was a beautiful town beside the Jordan River, a key crossroads on the highway that went all the way north to Galilee as well as southwest to Jerusalem. Known for its climate, orchards, farms and commercial travel, Jericho was ideally positioned for tax collecting. Zacchaeus is described as "a ruler among tax collectors" (Luke 19:2), a position which guaranteed wealth and provided security by the hated Roman authorities.

Zacchaeus was not lucky. He was a

collaborator with the enemy, a betrayer of his spiritual heritage, perhaps even whispered about as "that money-grubbing little cheat." The sycamore tree he climbs is not our American variety but a type of fig tree native to that area. His act of climbing the tree to see over the crowd would have been out of character for a man of his social standing.

Luke tells this story against the backdrop of Jesus having just healed a blind man beside the road going into Jericho. So we see the grace of God grant new life to a man stricken by disease followed by God bringing new life to a man whose life was lost in his own selfish choices. Grace can overcome any barrier to God's gift of life.

Most people probably despised Zacchaeus. The Jews saw him as a collaborator with their hated Roman overlords, a man excluded from synagogue, whose wealth was paramount to blood money. The Romans probably saw him as a selfish opportunist who would do anything to get rich.

Was Zacchaeus just curious about Jesus that day, or had he reached the stage of inner emptiness and imagined this Jesus might offer some kind of purpose or meaning to life? Looking back on my personal encounter with Christ, I can see the experiences and people that gently and progressively brought me to that strategic encounter of faith that changed my life.

In that unusual, even humorous moment, Jesus looked up at the spectacle of a tax collector in a tree and announced, "Come down from there. I'm coming to your house for dinner tonight!"

Grace is more creative and surprising than we can understand. In a moment, grace can change everything for a lifetime. We celebrate how grace turned the Apostle Peter from betrayer of Jesus to leader of the early church and how grace turned the Pharisee Saul into Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles.

The text is not clear about the timing of Zacchaeus' announcement that he would now give half of all he owned to the poor and repay fourfold anyone he had cheated (v. 8). Here is an act of authenticity and action that must have shocked everyone, including religious leaders, tax collectors who worked under

Formations

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Scripture: Luke 19:1-10

Zacchaeus and his Roman bosses. This from the man most of Jericho called "a sinner" (v. 7).

Jesus said: "Today, salvation has come to this household because he (Zacchaeus), too, is a son of Abraham" (v. 9). This story reminds us of the rich young ruler who came to Jesus seeking the way of eternal life and walked away because he could not give his wealth away to help the poor (Mark 10:17-22).

What a contrast! I wonder how the crowd that grumbled about Jesus going to Zacchaeus' home reacted to the tax collector's amazing generosity and dramatic change of values? I have seen the change grace can make in people: the alcoholic who sought help and became a model husband and father, the convict who served his term and went back into prison to teach the Bible to those still serving their terms, the celebrated beautiful college couple who abandoned their selfish lifestyle to become effective witnesses on campus.

We don't know much about the details of Zacchaeus' life before he met Jesus, but it is obvious he began to live out Jesus' teachings that God's people are willing to give away their coat, walk the second mile and love their enemy (Matthew 5:38-48).

Grace enables you to live differently and see people in a new way. Faith is much more than knowing you will go to heaven one day. Faith is living each day out of gratitude to God. Faith is understanding that the grace of God is intended for all who will accept it. Faith is a desire to share God's love.

Do you suppose Zacchaeus gave away everything? Did he live up to his profession or continue, but in a totally new way with integrity and generosity? Because of his notoriety, did he become an undeniable example of how God can change a life?

The resounding concluding statement of this story is our example and message: "The Human One came to seek and to save the lost" (v. 10).

Retired after 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.