

Salvation Means a Just Community: Zacchaeus & The Crowd

Sermon delivered on August 8th, 2021 by Zac Klassen

**Sing: "Zacchaeus was a wee little man and a wee little man was he. He climbed up in a Sycamore tree for he Lord he wanted to see. And as the savior passed that way, he looked up in the tree and he said: Zacchaeus, you come down, for I'm going to your house today, yes I'm going to your house today."*

I am guessing that we are all very familiar with this old tune based on the story of Zacchaeus from Luke 19...I certainly remember hearing it as a child and I remember how my Uncle would often call me Zacchaeus, given the similarity to my own name "Zacharie." The story of Zacchaeus has many appealing features that make it memorable, especially the Sycamore tree. Like many kids, I really liked climbing trees—in fact I still do—and so the Zacchaeus story had and continues to have an immediate appeal to me. As I prepared for this sermon today, however, what I noticed were not the familiar elements. Instead, what stood out to me was an element of this story that was a bit more unfamiliar to me and that is the presence of "the crowd." Based on the children's tune alone, you might come away with the impression that Luke's retelling of that day Jesus passed through Jericho is mostly about Jesus and Zacchaeus; Zacchaeus, the lost man whose life as a rich and corrupt tax collector has placed him outside of Jesus' kingdom of justice and care for the poor; and Jesus, the savior who identifies Zacchaeus in his lostness, invites himself over, and thus inspires Zacchaeus to make amends. There can be little doubt that this story *is* about Zacchaeus and the salvation he experiences in his encounter with Jesus. But what of the crowd? What do they experience in this encounter? And how does Zacchaeus's salvation relate to their own salvation? Today, as we continue our worship series on "Seeking Justice Together" by looking at the story of

Zacchaeus, I want us to consider these questions. What does the crowd experience in the encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus and how does Zacchaeus' salvation relate to their own salvation?

Already, the reader's theatre for this morning has helped us to consider the relationship between Zacchaeus and the crowd. The crowd is a large group following Jesus, waiting to see what he will do next. Among them is Zacchaeus, very likely a Jew among many other fellow Jews in the crowd. But just because Zacchaeus was a Jew among his kin did not mean that he belonged to them. In fact, our text from Luke makes it clear that Zacchaeus was not liked. He was labeled a "sinner," someone that the crowd did not want to associate with. Thus, when the crowd noticed Zacchaeus, they prevented him from pushing "his way closer to the road" to see Jesus. The crowd blocked him. The community fervently seeking after Jesus, prevented a fellow-seeker from seeing Jesus.

This is a stark image that should give us pause and maybe for some of us it is an unfamiliar image. Often when we think of Zacchaeus' first failed attempt to see Jesus, the image that comes to mind is *not* an image of a crowd intentionally blocking him but rather of this small man trying to peek above the tall crowd to get a glimpse of Jesus. There is good reason for us to have this image in our minds since most translations give you that sense by describing Zacchaeus as "small in stature." Some commentators note, however, that when Luke mentions that Zacchaeus was "small in stature" the original Greek text could also be read as describing Zacchaeus as not necessarily really short, but just generally a younger person, perhaps a young adult; old enough to work for Rome but young enough to not be as respected

as his elders.¹ Regardless of whether the problem was Zacchaeus' height or his youth, though, we can imagine that the crowd could have made accommodations for him. Luke tells us that "on account of the crowd" Zacchaeus could not see Jesus, and this suggests there was an intentional decision not to let Zacchaeus through.

Now why not? Well, Luke tells us that Zacchaeus was a tax collector and tax collectors were *not* popular. By virtue of this job, then, Zacchaeus would have been disrespected by the people. After all, he was working for Rome and was a *chief* tax collector at that. In Luke's Gospel, tax collectors appear many times as despised and ostracized among the people but as accepted by Jesus who often has table fellowship with them (cf. Luke 5:27ff, Luke 7:29-35. Luke 15:1ff, Luke 18:10ff). Zacchaeus was likely a Jew whose job as a tax collector made him a traitor in the eyes of most of his kin. In addition, however, Zacchaeus was also wealthy. If being a tax collector didn't make him a traitor, then his wealth would have made him even more suspect by many. Even Jesus' closest disciples, who had already seen him eating with tax collectors, might have wondered whether Zacchaeus, this wealthy man, could really be a part of Jesus' kingdom. After all, just a short time before the encounter with Zacchaeus, Jesus had told his disciples how difficult it is for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God (Luke 18:24). But it is what happens next with Zacchaeus that testifies to what Jesus had also said about the wealthy entering the kingdom: "what is impossible for mortals," Jesus said, "*is* possible for God" (Luke 18:27).

¹ Joel B. Green, for example, notes: "...it may be that the Greek text is better represented with a reference not to his [Zacchaeus'] shortness of stature but to his relative youth. This would account for his treatment as an insignificant person for whom the crowd would not make room." (Joel B. Green. *The Gospel of Luke*, p.669 Eerdmans. Kindle Edition)

Next, Zacchaeus finds a way to overcome the obstacle of the crowd in order to see Jesus: a trusty Sycamore tree provides a perfect vantage point. Here, as an aside, I want to say that I love it that part of the creation participates in this moment of salvation—a testament, I think, to the fact that God’s salvation involves the whole of creation. As Zacchaeus observes from the tree, Jesus sees him and tells him to hurry and come down for he “must” stay at his house that very day. In the conversation that ensues, we do well to note again the presence of the crowd. I want you to take a moment, close your eyes, and imagine the scene: a large crowd of people, everyone pressed close to Jesus as he stands below this Sycamore tree looking up at Zacchaeus; Jesus invites Zacchaeus down from the tree and draws him to his side. Where just moments before Zacchaeus had been pushed out, he is now the closest person to Jesus. The crowd begins to grumble audibly, and Zacchaeus and Jesus can hear them doing so: “what’s he doing there? He’s a sinner!” It is at this point that Zacchaeus finally speaks—up until now he has had no voice—and when he speaks, we hear something unfamiliar come from his mouth. The familiar words we expect to hear suggest that it is at this point in his encounter with Jesus that Zacchaeus resolves to make a change from his greedy ways to a life of radical generosity:

“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.” (Luke 19:8, NRSV, emphasis added)

Here, however, this translation may not be the best way of capturing Zacchaeus’ voice. As we and countless readers of the bible before us strain to translate Zacchaeus’ response into our own native tongues, we hear him say something different to Jesus:

“Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I *give* to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I *pay back* four times as much.”²

² The ASV, ESV, KJV, and RSV all retain the present tense form of the verbs in this sentence in their translations. As

Did you notice the difference? In this translation, Zacchaeus is describing what he already regularly does with his possessions!³ Now if we have heard him right, then how would this change our understanding of Zacchaeus' story? And how might this help us understand what the crowd experiences in this encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus?

Let us imagine the scene one more time. Zacchaeus hears the scorn of the crowd—“Sinner!”—and defends himself to Jesus in their midst. “Jesus, they haven’t even given me the time of day. They see me coming and they assume the worst. I know that I’ve done wrong in my life, but the message that you preach, of justice and of care for the poor, I have already been doing my best to live this way! This crowd, however, has assumed that my job and social status make me a sinner by default without getting to know me.”

At this point the crowd, still skeptical of this ‘sinner’s defense’, waits to hear what Jesus will say and when Jesus responds, it is another shocker: “Today salvation has come to this house!” (Luke 19:9) Now, given the unfamiliar reading of the Zacchaeus story that we are exploring, what could this possibly mean? If Zacchaeus has not repented in this moment, then how has salvation come to his house? If Zacchaeus has not been transformed from greedy tax collector to generous giver, then what salvation does Jesus declare in this moment? Here it is important to note that the Gospel of Luke often presents salvation as a comprehensive and ongoing process that involves not only individuals but also the community. Salvation does not

³ The Greek verbs in this sentence, “give” and “pay back,” are in the present tense, not the future tense. There are arguments for still translating it as a future action that Zacchaeus resolves to take, but just as likely is that Zacchaeus is describing what he already does. Joel B. Green notes that the verbs in this sentence “have often been interpreted as examples of the ‘futuristic present’ or as having the nuance of ‘present resolve.’” Green also notes, however, that “It is fully consistent with the progression of the Lukan narrative to this point...to take these verbs as present progressives: ‘My customary practice is to give half of what I have to the poor, etc.’” (Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 671. Eerdmans. Kindle Edition).

work transformation for individuals alone but for the whole community as well! Salvation means a community of justice, not individuals practicing justice. What if, then, Jesus' words to Zacchaeus were directed not only to him but also to everyone present. Imagine Jesus turning to the crowd, a hand on Zacchaeus' shoulder saying: "Salvation has come to this house, because he [Zacchaeus] too is a son of Abraham." (Luke 19:9) You can imagine the murmur in the crowd: "What did he just say? A son of Abraham? No, no, no....he's a traitor; a sinner!" "No," says Jesus, "he is a son of Abraham." "He was lost to you, but today he is found. He is part of you again." Jesus, the Lord and Master, has taken Zacchaeus, seen by the community as a traitor, a son of Rome, the "lost," and has restored him and his household to the community from which they had been wrongly excluded. Maybe, then, we can hear two aspects of salvation being declared in Jesus' words: the first is the personal aspect of salvation that is evident in Zacchaeus' regular choice to give up his possessions and take care of the poor. The second is the corporate aspect of salvation that Jesus brings in this moment in the story, which is the restoration of the fractured community—making right in the community what had been wrong. Perhaps, then, our bulletin title for today which reads "Zacchaeus makes amends," could just as easily been "Jesus makes amends for Zacchaeus and the Crowd!" With his declaration of salvation, Jesus transforms the fractured relationship between Zacchaeus and the community. It is as if Jesus' says:

up until now you have seen Zacchaeus and his house as outsiders, sinners, and as unjust members of Rome's upper-class. But ironically, by excluding Zacchaeus you have been letting your assumptions, your stereotypes, and your social conventions get in the way of being a community of justice together. You are worse off for it. Zacchaeus is a part of God's family. Let's go eat with him and rediscover our relationship together as God's family. Yes, he is wealthy, and I have already told you that this makes it difficult for him to enter the kingdom. But what is impossible for mortals is possible for God and Zacchaeus is living proof! Look, he cares for the poor, he is generous with his wealth,

and he restores what has been unjustly taken. Yes, he will need to continue to work at this, but no less than you will need to work out your salvation! Let's work together with him and his house as partners in the kingdom work that God is up to.

How might this reading of the Zacchaeus story help us, at BMC, seek justice together as we follow Christ? Perhaps this reading can challenge us to think about some of the following questions (some of which I hope we can pick up in second hour).

1. Are there ways that the church today acts as a barrier to seeing Jesus rather than as a gateway or a space of welcome for encountering Jesus? If so, how might Jesus be calling us to change?
2. In the Zacchaeus story, wealth and social status were major factors that determined how the crowd judged Zacchaeus. What major factors determine how we judge people? Are they similar? Different?
3. Who have we stereotyped or underestimated in our society or excluded as "sinners" because we have assumed that they could not possibly be living God's justice?
4. How might our understanding of "salvation" change with this new reading of the Zacchaeus story?

During our second hour I can post these questions in the chat for our consideration. We are a community seeking justice together. May we be vigilant in ensuring that we do not write off anyone as partners in this holy work. May we, like Jesus, be willing to stop and pay attention to all of those around us, especially those who are excluded, long enough to realize that we need each other to build up the body of Christ so that God's justice may be witnessed inside and outside of our churches.

AMEN