



The Stakes Are High:
“SO PAY IT FORWARD!”

Rev. Laurie Haller
First United Methodist Church
Birmingham, Michigan
Scripture: Luke 19:1-10

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” 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.” Then Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

Do you remember the old Bible school and Sunday school song?

***Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he.
He climbed up in a sycamore tree, for the 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, for I’m going to your house today.”***

That little song sure helped me remember the story of Zacchaeus as a kid. But it doesn’t tell the entire story, does it? Sure, Zacchaeus met Jesus, Jesus called him down out of that tree, and Zacchaeus gave his money to the poor, but that isn’t the whole tale! Oh no. Far more happened that day! Like so many stories of Jesus, this is a story about the movement of God’s grace.

We’re told that Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector and was rich. Being a tax collector was a much-despised occupation in Israel. Tax collectors were considered traitors to their own people and conspirators with the Romans. In addition, there was a widespread suspicion that tax collectors were dishonest. They overcharged people, pocketing the difference. That Zacchaeus was called a chief tax collector implicated him more deeply in the corrupt Roman system that sought to crush and oppress. The fact that he was rich added to the assumption that Zacchaeus gained his money at the expense of others.

Zacchaeus was a part of the system, yet there was a struggle within his heart. Luke says that he was “trying to see who Jesus was.” But why did Zacchaeus climb the tree? Have you ever noticed that the New Testament rarely gives us information about a person’s physical characteristics? What do we know about Jesus’ appearance? Nothing. There have been millions of pictures, paintings, drawings and sculptures of Jesus over the centuries, but we have no idea what he really looked like. Luke, however, is intentional about telling us that Zacchaeus was short in stature.

In the ancient world, there was a prejudice against people who had physical disabilities. In particular, people who were unusually short were routinely marginalized in the Greco-Roman world and were the object of jokes. You can just imagine the crowd laughing at poor Zacchaeus, running as fast as he could to scoot up that sycamore tree before anyone else, just so he could see Jesus.

The Greek word for short stature can also be interpreted metaphorically. Not only was physical disability synonymous with sin, but smallness of stature was also equated with smallness of spirit. In other words, Luke could be implying that Zacchaeus was short on character and maturity as well as physical height. What do people of low character do to compensate for their lack of integrity? Why, they climb ladders. They are ruthless in doing whatever it takes to stand out above others.

Were Zacchaeus’ motives entirely honorable in climbing the tree? Did Zacchaeus want Jesus to see him? Was he trying to impress Jesus? Was he just climbing one more ladder, wanting the best seat in the house? Or was he simply curious?

Because of prejudice against his shortness, did Zacchaeus suffer from low self-esteem, selling himself short by working in a despised occupation? Did Zacchaeus feel shame coursing through his body as he ran? Was he filled with rage at others, himself and God because of his predicament? Did he think, “Maybe I am beyond salvation! God’s mercy doesn’t apply to me. It’s not going to do any good to see Jesus.”

Or had Zacchaeus heard that Jesus was a friend to tax collectors? Was there a deep yearning in him, something that caused him to say, “Maybe Jesus can help me create a new life.” I suspect Zacchaeus knew in his heart that he was living in a way that displeased God. That’s why he was trying so desperately to see who Jesus was. He was tired of running. Some of us can’t ever get past our own sin and are convinced there is no hope for us. Others of us don’t even recognize our sin. In anger, we blame everyone else, including God.

We must never minimize how much anguish and denial can be involved in being honest with ourselves. Do you remember the words of the great Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: “If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”

Zacchaeus was at a watershed moment in his life. The stakes were high. This was his chance. It was time to come clean. Luke is trying to tell us in this story that through God's grace, we, too, can come clean. Do you believe that your sins are pardonable? Can you forgive yourself? Do you believe that a power greater than yourself can restore you to sanity, that God loves you unconditionally, you are a child of God and you are redeemable?

Zacchaeus climbed that tree as an expression of hope. It was a sign of impending transformation. Of course, not only was Zacchaeus seeking Jesus, Jesus was also seeking him. God's prevenient grace was moving within Zacchaeus before he was even aware of it. Out of the whole crowd of people, all wanting a piece of him, Jesus noticed one person.

When Jesus came to the tree, he stopped, looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, I see you. Come on down. I'm going to stay at your house today." Before Zacchaeus could even say a word, Jesus approached him and offered grace.

However, the translation from the Greek is sharp. This is not a gesture of cheap grace. It's a demand for transformation. Can it be that grace exposes us for who we truly are? Vitor Westhelle, a professor at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, puts it this way: "Zacchaeus, let's go. Get down from there and face your own low and debased stature and know yourself for what you truly are. And today I will enter your luxurious and secured home just as you have invaded and plundered the poor houses of these people. How's that for grace?"ⁱ

It's a harsh grace, a grace that confronts, but grace nonetheless. Zacchaeus was busted, exposed, embarrassed. Why? Because Jesus loved him. Jesus wasn't concerned about his sordid past. Jesus didn't care that he was short. Jesus knew who Zacchaeus could be and opened the door for him to become a new person.

People can be transformed, you know. Every one of us can change. Every one of us can come down from the trees where we are hiding. Was it difficult for Zacchaeus to let Jesus into his well-protected house with an alarm system and a pit bull guarding the yard? Evidently not, because Zacchaeus was ready for change. He hurried down and was happy to welcome Jesus.

There's one catch, though. Transformation can never happen without doing something about the harmful acts we have committed. After everyone grumbled about how Jesus went in to be the guest of a sinner, Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much."

This, my friends, is the most dangerous part of the story. The movement of God's grace begins with God but it's not all God. *Rependere*, the Latin word for repentance, literally means to bow down, to be bent over by the weight of the pain of the world and know that you are a part of it. You and I will only know how we should repent of our sin when we open our eyes to the rest of the world and come down from the tree.

We cannot relieve our guilt over injustice and oppression by simply giving money. We cannot be transformed by simply sitting in worship on Sunday morning and refusing to embrace the

stranger. We cannot repent by simply resting in our suburban houses, clutching our rummage and shutting ourselves off from the poor. We meet Christ when we put a human face to the refugee and the homeless. We encounter grace when we come down from the tree, mingle with the outcasts and tax collectors of the world and pay it forward.

You see, Zaccheus didn't just pay back what he took from others. Because of what Jesus did for him, Zaccheus decided to pay it forward. He restored four-fold what he took from others and made a commitment to give half of his earnings to the poor from then on. And how did Jesus respond? He said, "Behold, salvation has come to this house."

Isn't that the primary message of Jesus? Jesus asks all of us to pay it forward because the stakes are high. Because of God's grace in our life, we are called to model that grace to others by doing what Jesus asked us to do: engage in extravagant and even outrageous acts of generosity and faith that don't make sense to the world.

People can be transformed, you know. Our world is filled with people who are yearning to come down from their trees, experience God's grace, and pay it forward to others. On August 20 of this year at 7:00 a.m., a woman paid for her iced coffee at a Starbucks in St. Petersburg, Florida, along with the caramel macchiato ordered by the driver behind her. From then on an estimated four hundred and fifty people in a row paid for the drinks behind them until the chain ended ten hours later. Barista Celeste Guzman said, "Somebody wants to be nice and do something generous for the person behind them and then the person behind them keeps it going." Four hundred and fifty people.

Thirteen years ago on my last Sunday before taking a three month renewal leave, a young man gave me a card with a twenty dollar bill inside. The card said, "A few years ago I was going through a rough time. A friend gave me a \$20 bill and said, 'Go, do something fun. It will revive your spirit.' So I am paying it forward. Please use this \$20 bill to do something fun on your leave." I did, and I have paid that same \$20 bill forward to others over the years.

A young man from India offers his kidney to an older Asian woman as a pure gift, paying it forward because of God's goodness in his life. A homeless man, who is a professional but has experienced some hard knocks in recent years, volunteers his services to assist others in the midst of his own struggles. He says, "I want to pay it forward because of everyone who has helped me."

A handicapped woman has a ten minute neck and shoulder massage and leaves money and a Pay It Forward Card so the next person can have a massage for free. One day a boy notices that the car parked next to them is just about to receive a ticket. He asks his mother if he can top off the parking meter to prevent the driver from getting a fine. It saves someone \$79. Because of God's grace, people of any age, place or status can pay it forward.

This morning you and I have a chance to pay it forward by offering to God our estimates of giving for 2015. If four hundred and fifty people at Starbucks can pay it forward, most of whom are probably not Christians, then how much more can we as disciples of Jesus Christ pay it forward? These cards represent all of the many people who have paid it forward by modeling

generosity and faithful stewardship in your life. The stakes are high, so pay it forward by coming down from your tree. Offer your very life to Christ so that salvation will come to every corner of our world, today and every day.

*Zacchaeus was a little wee little man but a happy man was he.
For Jesus came right to his house and ate a meal with him.
He decided to give the money back and pay it forward, too.
And Jesus said, "Salvation has come to this house today."
And Zacchaeus said, "What a better man I'll be. What a better man I'll be."*

ⁱ "Exposing Zacchaeus," Vitor Westhelle, *Christian Century*, October 31, 2006.