

Sunday, October 30, 2022

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Questioning Believers

Luke 19:1-10

INTRODUCTION

The richest person in the world, Elon Musk, just bought Twitter for 44 billion. The New British Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, is reportedly richer than King Charles III. Amazon's Jeff Bezos is worth about \$144 billion. What might you do with 144 billion dollars? Solve world hunger? Build your own rocket ship? Finance clean water supply for the world? Buy your own country? I think it was Nelson Rockefeller who confessed that it was easier to make a million dollars than it was to give it away correctly. Wealth can be a heavy burden, especially for followers of Jesus. He talked about it a lot. In Luke's Gospel, the dangers and encumbrance that often accompanies wealth is a frequent theme.

Today's reading is one such lesson that has multiple layers for us to peel back and consider. Jesus and his entourage are traveling through Jericho, a town just outside of Jerusalem that was an important customs center along a busy trade route. Here lived the reviled "chief tax collector" who became quite wealthy through a corrupt practice of collecting taxes well in excess of what was given to the Roman Empire. As Jesus enters the scene, I am itching for some serious divine justice to come down on this heartless little man. Hear this story of Jesus and the Tax man, from the Gospel of Luke 19:1-10.

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."

PRAYER

Loving an merciful God, guide our hearts and minds to hear your word to us this morning & may the words of my mouth and the meditation of each heart be pleasing and acceptable to you, our ROCK and our REDEEMER. Amen.

SERMON: Questioning Believers

Luke paints such a vivid picture for us with this story. For me it plays out like a scene from a movie. I imagine the streets are packed like a Red Sox World Series parade down Boylston Street. Everyone is craning to get a glimpse of the rising celebrity, Jesus Christ superstar as he walks into town with his band of friends and curious followers.

Zacchaeus (in my mind) is kind of like a young Danny DiVito playing a Harvey Weinstein type character. He is very rich. He is very powerful and most likely an arrogant little guy. He is the “chief tax collector,” which means he stands at the top of the collection pyramid, taking a cut of commission from all who collected taxes for him. Tax collectors were despised in Israel because they were viewed as extortionists and Roman collaborators. No one wants to be seen with the chief tax collector, yet everyone is terrified that this little weasel will show up at their house for an audit.

When Jesus arrives in town, Zacchaeus probably has his security team clear a pathway through the crowd, but Jesus is already passing by. Zacchaeus orders his men hoist him up in to the tree. We really don’t know why he is so determined though. All Luke tells us is that he was trying to see who Jesus was. But clearly this fat-cat was more than just curious. He was driven to lay eyes on Jesus. Perhaps, like so many others who heard about Jesus, he too was looking to be healed in some way. Maybe, even with all his wealth and power, he still felt empty and alone. We really don’t know what compelled such behavior.

Arranging himself on the branches above the crowd Zacchaeus sees the Holy One walking down the road. Then, Jesus stops, looks directly up at him and calls him by name, as if seeing an old friend, “Zacchaeus, hurry, come down from there. Let’s go to your house.” I don’t know if I’d be thrilled or frightened out of my wits if Jesus invited himself over to my house, especially if I was the chief tax collector of Jericho. Everyone there was stunned as the two walked off to his house! I picture Jesus throwing his arm around Zacchaeus shoulder.

This is a completely scandalous event. In the ancient world, who you stayed with and ate with and hung around with carried great social significance. Come to think of it, that is also true in much of our culture.

When I lived in LA, who you knew and the people you socialized with was a major issue. Success was all about projecting affluence and connection to the right people. The car you drove, the restaurants you ate in and who and where you were seen with was not to be taken lightly. Creating the perception of success and position was actually more important than the true nature of your standing and talent.

I knew one guy who would actually spend his last dollar to rent a Bentley and park it on Rodeo Drive, lay down his credit card for the latest style from House of Bijan then dine at a posh outdoor patio before going to a pitch meeting. It was all smoke and mirrors. At the end of the day, he'd return both the wardrobe and car, before going home to his Inglewood apartment. But this guy knew the game and went to extreme measures to present himself as a successful and confident young producer. It worked!

More than anywhere else I have ever been, in Hollywood, perception is reality, perception is power. It doesn't have to be true, it just has to look like it is. LA is pretty severe, but in LA or Boston, and everywhere in between, we frequently judge one another by our perception of who someone is way more than who they actually are.

Our perceptions profoundly impact how we experience life. perception molds, shapes, and influences our own self-perception and the way we view reality. We tend to believe what we perceive to be accurate, and that creates our own reality based on those perceptions. AND although our perceptions feel very real, that doesn't mean they're necessarily factual. When you think of Danny DiVito playing Harvey Weinstein you get a certain perception of a character based solely on an idea of what that person must be like. We don't know either of these men at all, but we tend to have fully formed opinions of who we think they are.

Chances are very good that if we were on that street when the despised Zacchaeus walked off with Jesus, we too would have been disgusted. Everyone knew Zacchaeus was a money grubbing, traitorous scoundrel. How could Jesus do such a thing when he is surrounded by throngs of people truly in need? I might have written off Jesus for good!

He's the one who said, "Woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort." And remember when that rich young man came to Jesus and

asked what thing he must do to receive eternal life? Jesus told him that he must sell his possessions and give to the poor. But the young man was unwilling to part with his great wealth. Jesus then said to his disciples: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." Those who heard it asked him, 'Then who can be saved?' and Jesus replied, 'What is impossible for mortals is possible for God'" It seems to me quite clear what Jesus thinks about rich people.

My perception of Jesus is the Good Shepherd, the one who searches out the lost sheep. Those who are poor, neglected, infirmed and deprived. We know that Jesus certainly does frequently minister to those who are neglected and cast out on the margins. Zacchaeus is quite the opposite. He is undeniably an active participant in supporting the oppressive Roman occupiers and even worse, he is getting rich while doing it off the backs of his own people! Zacchaeus is a lost cause. He is both filthy rich and utterly corrupt. My perception and subsequent judgement of this man would probably have had me among the grumblers.

But this also makes what we read here to be so astonishing. In God's view, Zacchaeus is also a lost sheep. The one WE perceive as unredeemable and undeserving of grace is exactly where Jesus sets his sights. Jesus looks past the perception and sees a broken, lonely man, risking his dignity in public to climb a tree, just to see Jesus. Zacchaeus is desperately seeking redemption. And so, we are about to see what is impossible for mortals become possible for God. Zacchaeus receives Jesus into his home and is totally transformed.

He says "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." 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."

It is so easy to slip into the trap of righteous indignation and judgement. It is natural for us to fall prey to our perceptions being the ultimate truth. We see people as only one dimensional and pass judgement with very little information. We rely so heavily on our past experiences and end up believing the worst of someone without questioning how they might have come to be that way. Here, in this story, we learn that the idea is to be more of a questioning believer, not only in how we understand our faith but also in every relationship as well. We should always question our perceptions. Perceptions never fully defines who we are, but it very well might define where our blinders may be located.

Here we see Jesus restoring a disreputable rich man who everyone had written off. Yet, encountering Jesus, he is able to access and put into action his true generosity and break free of the shackles of greed and grandiosity. We see Jesus calling us to question our easily assumed belief about on who God's favor rests. Like Zacchaeus, we too must look into the mirror and open up our hearts.

We too need a transformation that will unlock our true generosity, both in the way we use our wealth, but perhaps even more. in the way we view one another. Jesus came, "to seek out and save the lost," rich and poor, it doesn't matter. We must have the humility to hold our perceptions and judgements lightly.

Time and time again we see how encountering Jesus can transform every heart and change any life. All we need do is seek to be healed and follow in His way.

It's easy to lose hope in God's ability to save our world. The world seems so shattered and divided. Violence and hate and frustration boils over every day. Corruption, injustice and contempt seem to be predictable and expected. It is understandable for cynicism to overwhelm our belief that the world is redeemable. Yet, as a questioning believer we can check our perceptions and remember Zacchaeus' story and in doing so, maybe even redeem our own narrow, firmly fixed ideas.

What do you see as impossible for our world today? Who do you see as beyond redemption? Think again.

As questioning believers, we are given a chance to keep hope alive even when all seems lost. Jesus came, "to seek out and save the lost," no matter who they are. The good news of the Gospel is just this;

What is impossible for us to even imagine is always possible for God. Keep your eye on that needle, a camel is about to come squeezing through.

AMEN!