

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
October 23, 2016

“Salvation for the Lost, the Least, and Unlikely”

“Jesus said to Zacchaeus,
“Today salvation has come to this house.”
Luke 19:9

PRELUDE

I came to the conclusion this week
that it is not possible for me to work
through the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus
without filtering the story through the
song imparted to me as a child.

My Christian nurture,
along with many others I suspect,
included learning to sing,
“Zacchaeus was a wee little man.”

**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 came 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.**

The song was complete with physical actions:
(1) hands upfront, extended, indicating
just how wee was Zachaeus.
(2) there was encouragement to pantomime
the climbing of a tree.

- (3)and once up, to pretend shading the
eyes, scan the horizon, looking for Jesus;
- (4)to pretend some more, Jesus striding,
arms swinging, merrily along;
- (5)Jesus also shading his eyes,
squinting as looking up;
- (6)Jesus pointing, “Zacchaeus, you come down,”
- (7)finally, as the song closed, a rousing clap:
“For I’m going to your house today.”

It is a wonderful children’s song.
It tells the story.
It is memorable and fun to sing.
It is physically engaging of the body;
engaging also of the mind, the imagination,
with play, with pretend,
such that you got to be both
Jesus and Zacchaeus.
You weren’t excluded either from
the one or the other;
you acted out (assuming the persona)
and identified with both.

I’m not sure if there exists a
top ten list of church songs for children,
but if a poll were to be taken, and I had a vote,
“Zacchaeus was wee little man”
would rank high on the list.

For me, I think the lesson took;
I absorbed the teaching:
little people count; they matter to Jesus.
And Jesus was liberated from the confinement
of church quarters.
How vitally important to realize
Jesus didn’t stay put in church –
he was quite mobile;
in the house, in the head, in the heart.

The lesson, though,
while translatable to children,
while imprintable upon
 impressionable children,
has insights not captured by the song,
insights for the wise and faithful,
that convey what the angels first heralded
to the shepherds when Jesus was born,
“bringing good news of great joy” to the world
(Luke 2:10).

Zacchaeus should be available and
 accessible to children;
but Zacchaeus should also be available and
 illustrious for those who are older
 and just as eager to understand
how God is working for social and
spiritual transformation of the world.

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God Seeking the Lost, the Least, and the Unlikely

There are three thoughts I'd like to highlight
from this lesson today. The first is simply to
remind that God goes out of the way to save
a people lodged in the peril of their sin.

Those we look upon as the heroes and heroines
of our faith all possessed **“nasty”** chapters best
omitted from their bios; yet God ventures off the
beaten path to reach them in the depths of their
estrangement.

Abraham was a liar;
Jacob a thief, a con artist;
Moses was a murderer;
Rahab was a harlot;

David, the poet/king,
was a premeditated, coldblooded killer (Uriah);
Paul, in our New Testament era, describes himself as
a persecutor of the church, a man of violence
(see I Corinthians 15:9; Galatians 1:13).
He was unworthy to minister save by
the grace of God that upended
and flipped life.

So also Zacchaeus,
described as “chief tax collector.”
Universally disliked,
save by those on his payroll.
He was the CEO, top of the pyramid,
who profited from the tax that kept
so many in misery.

Physically small,
he was largely despised.
Petite in size,
he elevated himself to advantage,
doing whatever was necessary,
using fear or force, to ensure
his stature as an imperial servant.
This is the man Jesus spotted, to whom
he said, “I must stay at your house.”
When in so saying, everyone grumbled
and wondered, what in the heck is
going on with Jesus? Why would he
be guest in the house of such a man.

The sense of urgency, the sense of obligation,
Jesus acting upon the imperatives that defined
his life, is what is so scandalous about the
Christian gospel. **“Christ seeks those that
sought him not, and asked not for him”**
(Matthew Henry, 1662-1714).

It doesn't matter how poorly a life has been scripted.
There always exists hope for a better day, a new life,

a redeemed life.
Zachaeus was lost and found,
 a prodigal in his own right.
When all others held him in contempt,
Jesus sought him out, went into his
house, to see what good might come of it.

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THE POSSIBILITY OF LIFE REVOLUTIONIZED

It is a striking feature of the story
that Zachaeus found his life
 turned upside down
in the presence of Jesus.

He climbed up the tree curious
to see a novelty, a celebrity,
the man known to restore sight
for the blind, hope for the hopeless.
So Zachaeus wanted to see
 what sort of man Jesus was (Luke 19:3).
Who, though, could have seen the
dramatic change that was coming?

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

This is an astounding, unprecedented
payment plan.
Please note: Zachaeus
 didn't give everything away;
he didn't write a blank check to cover the
 wages of his sin.
But he shows himself sincere, generous, and
excessive in making amends; he is sincere
and serious about being reconciled -
 in making right whatever wrong

he may have caused.

Take note:

just a page or two earlier in Luke's gospel,
there were a couple of incidents that got the
disciples thinking and wondering.

Remember the man who had asked:

What must I do to inherit eternal life (Luke 18:18)?
He was a good man, the man who posed the question.
But anxious about the state of his soul. Jesus advised,
sell what you have, give to the poor, and follow me. The man
couldn't, recall, and he went away sad, for he couldn't
see it in himself to alter his condition. Jesus commented,
it is hard for those blessed with much to enter the kin-dom
of God; in fact, it is easier for a camel to thread through the eye
of a needle than for those with material wealth to find
peace in the realm of God. The disciples were aghast at
this. If not the good, the respectable, the solid citizens
who keep life going - then who?

Who can be saved? (Luke 18:26)

Zachaeus illustrates an answer

If Zachaeus can be saved,

then anyone is open for the possibility.

And what must one do?

Again Zachaeus is a role model,

he demonstrates what a changed life looks like,
seeking to remedy the lives of others with what
resources he has available.

This is a wonderful moment,
a crescendo moment of
good news and great joy
causing Jesus to exclaim:

**"Today salvation has come
to this house ..."**

So many years ago, Washington Gladden wrote:
**“What our social order most needs is
not more and better laws,
nor a more rigorous enforcement of law;
it needs to be permeated by a better morality,
to have its whole conception of the
meaning and purpose of life revolutionized”**
(*Living Theological Heritage UCC*, Vol. 5, p. 412).

Reformations occur in the human heart,
and in our human institutions,
when the meaning and purpose of life
become revolutionized;
this is what the Christian movement was
in the beginning - it was a radical
reconfiguration centered on
the meaning and purpose of life.
It was a new age in which small people
took huge strides, forging a peace
with the peace of God.

In our age and time, filled with
fear and suspicion and anger,
we stand in need of reformation
worthy of the 21st century.
If the past holds clue to our future,
it is in the grace of lifestyle change
that brings good news and great joy
to the world. And the good news
and great joy comes when we find
ourselves in sync with the wisdom
and love inspired by Jesus.

Good news and great joy comes when
we are rightly aligned with what we have
within the will of God.

Bonhoeffer said:
**“the church is constituted
not by religious formulae, by dogma,
but by the practical doing of
what is commanded”**
(Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *A Testament to Freedom*).

This is the spirit in which we
challenge ourselves to **“Go, do likewise.”**
We reckon and pray there is
a little Zacchaeus in all of us.
We also reckon everyone can make a difference,
even if we fall short of the standard
Zacchaeus imposed upon himself.

Edmund Burke,
**“Nobody made a greater mistake than the
one who did nothing because they could
only do a little.”**

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I want to close with this.

Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees
when the kingdom of God was coming.
He answered: **“The kingdom of God is
not coming with things that can be observed;
nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or
‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom
of God is among you”** (Luke 17:21).

When and where -
these are questions that have
long perplexed Christians -
through the ages.
Even after resurrection, after having been
in Presence of Jesus as the risen Christ,
the disciples asked: Is now time for the

kin-dom to be restored (Acts 1:6)?
Still, they were so small minded,
still unaware the revolutionized life
the risen Christ imparts.

Luke punctuates his material with
incident after incident,
with revelation, with insight, with teaching:
the kin-dom of God is among you.
The kin-dom comes
to the odd, the unlikely,
unexpectedly, in a moment,
in the twinkling of an eye;
it comes **as grace** to save and redeem
and make us whole;
it comes **as peace**,
as **fierce urgency** to conform -
not to popular sentiment or raging fashion,
but to what is good and right and
pleasing in God's sight;
it comes **as consent** to embody and
demonstrate a revolutionized life.

The church doesn't always get it.
So the church counsels patience with
social pain and bigotry;
the church likes to preserve
"traditional" order - as if God
does not make all things new;
the church dispenses opiates in the
face of social suffering caused by
sin God never intended;
the church then becomes small minded,
single-minded, betraying its gospel power
to save and redeem the likes of Zachaeus.

So - the church is always in need of re-formation,
the church is always in need of elevating itself
above and beyond itself, into more light

that reflects God's love.

In the words of Don Cupitt,
we need “**smuggle**” Jesus into our practice
of Christianity. We need remember what
power he revealed, elevating our humanity
that we be called children of God
(Don Cupitt, *Ethics in the Last
Days of Humanity*, p. 28).

We need remember Zachaeus,
who surprised even Jesus, I think, with
his radical embrace of new life,
causing Jesus to exclaim:

**“Today salvation has come
to this house ...”**

So may it be for us, and ours, in what
time we are portioned.

Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,
for the demands of the day are many;
so be charitable as you read; and remember:
the contents of this sermon have not been edited
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*