

Surprised by Grace

Luke 19:29-40 Philippians 2:5-11 Luke 19:1-10

This year we have been following Jesus through Luke's gospel... Luke told us in chapter 9 that Jesus "resolutely set his face to go to Jerusalem." Well, we have arrived! But we're going to take a moment and look at an event that took place on the eve of Jesus' entry into the city.

This story is perhaps a familiar one, about a character who many of you probably learned about in Sunday school: Zacchaeus—the man short of stature who climbed a tree so he could see Jesus. We meet him this morning just *before* Jesus enters Jerusalem. So we're doing a short rewind from the triumphal entry passage we just heard.

This event takes place on the eve of Holy week. Jesus has been up north in Galilee, making his way south. He goes through what we call today the west bank, and ends up in Jericho, just north of the Dead Sea.

Jesus is now in the place where John the Baptist carried out his ministry. That's significant background information, because the people here still have John's preaching and teaching in their consciousness. We'll see why that's important momentarily.

Jesus has generated, by now, a huge following. So, imagine the crowds—large crowds, perhaps hundreds of people. And, the word has gotten out that Jesus is coming to town—so people drop everything to come out and see him. And in the midst of the hubbub of the arrival of Jesus, Zacchaeus comes onto the scene.

Tax day is here, so it seems fitting that we look at the ministry of Jesus to a tax collector. A bit of background is in order, so we can appreciate the full impact of what's happening here before I read our text.

When the Romans conquered people, and then occupied their land, they didn't do it in the same way that, say, the Babylonians did, or the Assyrians, or other nations, which was to conquer a people, take large groups of the population and deport them to their home land and keep them as prisoners, so they could then easily oppress the people who were left behind to be used as slaves in their own home land.

The Romans devised a completely new and more cost-effective way to occupy a conquered people. After conquering, they left the peoples' institutions all intact— (including the religious institutions)—and more or less gave them freedom, but of course they held a sword to everyone's neck to suppress any uprisings; there was a strong military presence

everywhere in the Roman empire. That was the Pax Romana, the peace of Rome. What Pax Romana really meant was: “Be good and we won’t kill you. And then they arranged for a taxation system that went something like this (I’m oversimplifying it for our purposes):

The Romans found and hired citizens from various people groups, who were willing to betray their own people and work as agents for the Roman government. Think of American and Russian spies during the cold war: Americans recruited Russians to spy on their own people; Russians recruited Americans to spy on America. There’s a big difference, though: we didn’t know who the Russian spies were and they didn’t know who our spies were; they blended in. In Jesus’ day, everyone knew who the tax collectors were, and they were hated, just as spies were because they were seen as betrayers.

So, the Romans needed Jewish insiders who knew where their fellow Jewish people had wealth, property and possessions. They hired them, paid them a modest salary, and protected them with Roman soldiers (they’d need it!).

These tax collectors, would find where the wealth is and tell the Roman authorities so they could tax them—and then on top of the salary

the tax collectors received, they also received a commission on the tax income they generated. So there was an incentive to bring in as much tax revenue as possible. But here's the deal: these tax collectors made money going both directions, because a Jewish citizen—quite often—would try to bribe the tax collector by paying him some \$\$ under the table, and say, “Don't tell the Romans about the large flock of sheep I have over in Bethlehem, and all the income I made recently from my carpentry business.” The tax collector would take that money and seemingly accept the bribe, but then tell the Romans about his flock of sheep and income anyway, and make even more money. Then they would lie and say, “I have no idea how the Romans found out about your sheep in Bethlehem. They must have spies.” Or, the tax collector would bribe *them*, and tell them that they would report *more* sheep or *more* income to the Romans than they actually had, and extort money from people that way.

So it's not hard to see how these tax collectors got rich. And, it's not hard to see why everyone hated them. They were betraying their own people and making money off of them, especially the poor, who would just become poorer. And they were getting rich off the Roman occupiers and off of a corrupt taxation system.

We need to see these tax collectors as people who had hardened their hearts and had become greedy persons who were willing to do just about anything to make more money. Go back and read the gospels from the beginning, and notice that almost every time the Pharisees and teachers of the law grumble and complain about Jesus, they say “he spends time with sinners and... tax collectors!” They’re so despised that they get their own category as outcasts and horrible human beings! Everyone else is a garden variety sinner; tax collectors are in a league of their own.

So, Zacchaeus is not the jolly ‘wee little man, a wee little man was he, who climbed up the sycamore tree’—as the children’s song goes. He was a money grubber. In the peoples’ eyes at least. But we’re going to see that Jesus saw the tax collectors in a completely different way than everyone else saw them. He didn’t see them as betrayers, calloused, and greedy. He saw them as like lost sheep—lost, or prodigal children. And we have to believe that Jesus saw them as very lonely people, and beneath the thick skin and piles of money he saw them as feeling quite ashamed of themselves for what they were doing. This is probably one of the reasons they loved Jesus, and how he won them over: he saw through the rough exterior to what was going on inside. This brings us to our text this morning

Luke 19:1-10

He 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."

Now, we need to pause for a moment fast forward in our minds to later that evening—after dinner we can assume. Luke compresses the account. We're not privy to the conversation that took place at Zacchaeus' house, but something significant obviously took place... because here is what happens (picking up at verse 8):

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." 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."

This is the word of the Lord

There is a series of surprises in this incident, which all come together in one big 'aha'...

The first surprise—which isn't really a surprise to us, but it obviously was to the people back then—is that Jesus would notice one person in such a big crowd. Luke highlights that for us, many times actually, in his gospel.

We don't expect that from famous people. And yet it is always Jesus' style to give people his full attention. That should help you feel encouraged in your prayer life! You have Jesus' full attention when you pray. He sees you. That's cool.

And not only does Jesus notice Zacchaeus, he calls him by name. That's significant here. The Pharisees and priests had labels for everyone—sinner, prostitute, leper, beggar, *tax collector*. By contrast, Jesus always called people by name, or called them friend. But what's remarkable in this instance is that Jesus takes notice of *one of the most despised people*, and calls *him* by his first name. He doesn't say, "Hey you there!" or "Sinner, come down from that tree." Jesus calls him by name, Zacchaeus, and invites himself over to Zacchaeus' house (which sounds like bad manners on Jesus' part). Here is a man who probably rarely, if ever, heard anyone call him by name, or rarely had anyone over to his home or who would want to spend time with him. And now the Lord of the universe addresses him personally and indicates that he *wants* to spend time with him. That had to have soured the people on Jesus from the start. But it must have felt so good to Zacchaeus.

A second surprise is that Jesus spends an entire evening—we can safely assume—with Zacchaeus. This is what really shocks the people, and makes them quite upset. When was the last time Zacchaeus had someone at his house, besides another tax collector or a Roman official or Roman soldier? Probably a long, long time—before he began his career in extortion. Notice it says that Zacchaeus was *happy* to welcome Jesus. Happy! So this wasn't bad manners on Jesus' part to invite himself over to Zach's house, it was a wise strategy—it boosted Zacchaeus' confidence and his inner joy to host someone. It humanized him.

A third surprise is that a man like Zacchaeus, who had become so calloused and greedy, would become so repentant, and then so generous—that is a big surprise. He gives half of his possessions to the poor and repays 4-fold to the people he's extorted money from. That had to have been a huge amount! This is why I would love to have been a fly on the wall at Zacchaeus' home that evening. What did they talk about? What questions did Zacchaeus ask Jesus? What questions did Jesus ask Zacchaeus? How did Jesus do it? How did he get through to him?

We have enough insight from Jesus' ministry as described in the gospels to know that Jesus had a way of disarming people; of being

personal, yet firm; a way of telling the truth, yet telling it in love without judging; a way of being engaging and interesting—and, of course, he had good news! Which was *new* news to the people, of God's grace and not judgment. But still, I'd love to know just how this conversation went! I'd love to see Jesus at work in this particular instance. But obviously we're not meant to know; Luke doesn't tell us. What we do know is that Jesus can soften the hardest of hearts.

The final surprise here is that a man who has done so much harm in his life should be publicly restored by Jesus as a son of Abraham. That's a surprise. This is a *public* restoration. That's very important. Jesus restores Zacchaeus' identity as a child of Abraham, when his fellow Jews had written him off and relegated him to an outsider, along with the other "sinners." Zacchaeus had probably written himself off too. He knew he had sold his soul to the Romans.

There are many private, one-on-one restorations in the gospels. Jesus has several one-on-one encounters with people as he restores them and brings new life. But this restoration of Zacchaeus is public. And that's important to note. It's important, I think, for *Zacchaeus'* sake. To be restored *fully*, he needed to be restored *publicly*.

All of these surprises come together in one interesting and important sentence in this passage—which I think is a key sentence. And that sentence is: when the people saw it, “*they all grumbled*” (murmured, complained, muttered, however you want to translate it. The Message: “*Everyone who saw the incident was indignant and grumped, “What business does he have getting cozy with this crook?”*).

They ALL grumbled... again, sometimes we hear that the Pharisees grumble, sometimes the scribes or teachers of the law grumble, sometimes it’s the disciples who grumble. But this time it’s everyone—they *all* grumbled. Remember that this is a *large* crowd. So, obviously, what Jesus has done here is scandalous; so much so that everyone is upset by it.

Why are all the people so upset?

The people are upset, as I see it, for one basic reason. They are expecting the messiah. The messianic expectation was at a fevered pitch at that time in Jewish history and culture. And many people had hoped that Jesus would be that messiah—why shouldn’t they? After all, remember where this incident is occurring: in Jericho, where John the Baptist carried out his ministry and announced that the messiah was coming. John was a hero to the people—he preached hellfire and brimstone, and said that

when the messiah came, he would bring the same. John said “he will baptize you with fire... and he will burn the chaff with unquenchable fire”—and he did not mean a fire to warm your hearts, but a fire of judgment. That’s what the people expected. And wanted.

They expected the messiah to be the new Elijah, and to do what Elijah did (1Kings 18): he lined up all of the false prophets of Baal, and all of the false gods, and called down fire upon them and consumed them. The people cheered for that; they loved Elijah for that because he conquered evil.

And that’s what they expected the messiah to do. He was to line up all of the evil people—the Roman oppressors and betrayers like Zacchaeus, and mow them down, Rambo style.

But what does Jesus do? First, he calls Zacchaeus by name—well, that’s an okay start, I guess. Then he tells him to come down from the tree. It’s getting better now. Then, just when the people expect Jesus to really let Zacchaeus have it, Jesus invites himself over to Zacchaeus’ house, spends an evening with him, offers him love and grace (that’s obvious from the result), Zacchaeus repents, and Jesus restores him as a fellow Jew. We can imagine the people saying, “What just happened here?!?!? The

messiah isn't supposed to do *that*. He's supposed to call down fire upon him."

The result of this encounter with Zacchaeus is that Zacchaeus gains ground, and Jesus loses ground. Zacchaeus gains ground, and Jesus loses ground. Jesus won no friends that day in Jericho. That's why the people grumbled and complained. Zacchaeus gained ground in a wonderful way. He was set free—the evidence of that is that he gave away goods and possessions and made right where he had done wrong. He became generous. What a gain for Zacchaeus, who was joined back into the human family and regained his identity—his cultural and religious identity. But Jesus loses ground, and we'll see the result of that during Holy Week as all of the religious leaders now begin to plot, very earnestly, how to kill him.

Jesus saved a lost man that day, and as a result he reiterates why he came: Jesus says, the son of man came to seek out and to save the lost (repeat). This, really is a statement to correct the false expectations the people had. Because Jesus does not say, "The son of man came to seek and crush God's enemies." Or, "The son of man came to seek and destroy evil." (which would've been the mission statements the *people* had for Jesus).

Although, in a way, Jesus does destroy evil, doesn't he? But he destroys it by restoring evil to good in this case. Ultimately, by week's end, he will destroy it by absorbing it in himself, by laying down his own life.

So, in a way, Jesus does line up the false prophets and the sinners like Elijah did. But just at the moment when they are to be done away with, Jesus takes their place. Jesus absorbs human wrath and judgment in himself.

So, Zacchaeus gains ground, and Jesus loses ground; Jesus absorbs the anger and wrath of the people—for Zacchaeus' benefit. Jesus absorbs the wrath of an entire mob for the sake of one person. Think about that. This is a clear foreshadowing of what's to come in the next week of Jesus' life.

We're going to sing a familiar hymn, Joy to the World, but to a different tune. It isn't in the Christmas section of the hymnal, so try not to think only of Christmas as you sing this. Think of the words of the hymn in terms of Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem and what he accomplished & what it means for us and for the world.

Joy to the World was written and composed by the great hymn composer Isaac Watts, but he did not write it as a Christmas carol. He

wrote it as a paraphrase of Psalm 98. Read the psalm and then read the lyrics to the hymn and you'll see the connection. It's about the coming King, and the kingly reign of God, and the coming Kingdom of God and all that it brings to us and to the world. This is a great Christmas theme, of course, and also a great theme for Palm Sunday.