

The Uncertainty of Surrender

LUKE 19:1-10 (NRSV) *He entered Jericho and was passing through it. ²A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. ⁴So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. ⁵When 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.” ⁶So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. ⁷All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” ⁸Zacchaeus 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.” ⁹Then Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”* The Word of God...

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I've done a little parlor trick with vs 3 several times, and I think I've done it here. Look at that 3rd verse: “*He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature.*” Who was short of stature? Of course, we know, don't we? We learned it in Kindergarten Sunday School: “Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he...” Right?

We were reading through Luke in Greek with Dr. Fred Craddock and when he asked the same question, “Who was short of stature?” the class (there were six of us) was silent. Finally, one student asked hesitantly, “Is this a trick question?”

Most English versions of the New Testament clearly state that it was Zacchaeus who was short. Our NRSV is not as clear, but it turns out the KJV is closest to the original Greek: “...*he sought to see Jesus who he was; and could not for the press, because he was little of stature.*” The rules of grammar, both in English and in Greek, say personal pronouns, in this case, “he” refers to the last-named antecedent, which in both the KJV and the original Greek would be Jesus.

But there's that children's song; the image is set early on. And there's that Hollywood image—6'3", light brown hair, blue eyes, Caucasian features—nothing like a 1st century Jewish laborer. (?)

If you like the other version, keep it. It doesn't change the story. But it's a reminder—once again—that serious Bible study is not easy, especially when the text is familiar. It's difficult to “clean the attic”—to clear out the broken shards of memory: scraps of remembered sermons and lessons, fragments of lyrics from poetry, or a hymn. It's hard to sweep away the clutter to make room for a new reading, fresh, as if for the first time. [Title Slide]

The fact that there are over 450 English versions, none of which are identical, should be enough to convince the serious student of the Bible that when we pick up that Holy Book there is more to understanding it than simply drawing our chairs in a circle and each one read a verse and say what it means to me.

So, let's go deeper. Remember the three most important factors to understanding a biblical text? Recite them with me: "Context, context, context."

The Synoptic Gospels follow a similar chronology, except for the time between the Galilean ministry and Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on the Sunday prior to his crucifixion. It's uncertain even how many times Jesus was in Jerusalem.

Matthew leaves a clear impression of a brief journey from Capernaum to Judea, traveling east of the Jordan River. Mark adds a few events along the way. Luke overlaps with Mark; but then there is a whole section—about nine chapters—unique to Luke. Scholars call it Luke's "Travel Narratives," a collection of stories, parables, and teachings arranged according to a literary device like a travelogue. Zacchaeus appears near the end of that section.

There is clear intent in Luke's Travel Narrative. It begins in chapter 9, verse 51: "*When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.*" It ends at chapter 19, verse 27: "*After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.*" And what we know as the Triumphal Entry follows immediately.

In a more immediate context, the Zacchaeus story follows the story in which a blind man is healed. Both stories are about seeing. The blind man just wanted to see; Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus. Both men saw; but even more crucial in both stories is that when each of the two men saw, Jesus already had seen them.

This has become a very popular stewardship text: "*...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.*" There are some who claim the ultra-rich could do exactly that and still live the high life-style to which they are accustomed. It has been calculated that the top 100 richest people in America have enough money to eradicate poverty without sacrificing their opulent life styles.

"*...half of my possessions I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone, I will pay back four times as much.*" I don't recall ever defrauding anyone; but I might be able to give away half my possessions. Jo Lynn and I have been talking about downsizing. We've accumulated a lot of "stuff" in 58 years of marriage, and a lot of it has been in storage for a decade or more. And we're asking, "Do we still need it?"

But, I think there's a deeper consideration in Zacchaeus' response to Jesus. Something significant happens in our priorities and aspirations when we truly see, and are seen by, Jesus. In our Lenten Study Magrey deVega links that significant happening to a statement by Paul. In the 3rd chapter of Philippians, Paul has been bragging about his spiritual pedigree; then does a complete turnaround (vs. 7): "*Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.*"

I've preached from this text before—you may remember—about that verb, "knowing." It's not a simple cognitive awareness or intellectual perception. In the

original language, this verb implies intimate, in-depth knowledge from direct observation or experience—like knowing of the taste of an orange, or the color of a sunset, or the tune of the “Star Spangled Banner.”

Once you know something by experience, it’s yours. An old song plays on the radio, and you’re back in your college dormitory room. A trace of perfume and you can almost hear the taffeta swishing at your high school prom.

We can describe God theologically; we can quote verse after verse of scripture; but Paul regards “... *everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus...*”

Throughout the Bible, “to see” is to understand—to know; and Zacchaeus “*sought to see Jesus, who he was.*” It’s important to see Jesus; but we enter a totally different plane of living when we realize and internalize the truth that, in Christ, God already has seen us. God always takes the initiative. Jesus said to Zacchaeus, “*Come down from that tree, for I must stay at your house today.*”

And something significant happened at that moment. Zacchaeus re-ordered his priorities. And here come those preachers with their stewardship sermons.

I remember a Sunday years ago when I delivered a strong stewardship sermon—I don’t remember what text I used; but I had blistered the congregation’s ears! And after the service a man said to me, “Jim, I get so tired of preachers trying to make me feel guilty because I have a little money.”

That’s not the point—at least in the story of Zacchaeus. It’s apparent by his response that Zacchaeus had enough to give away half, and to restore four-fold any money he had defrauded, and it’s reasonable to infer he still would have enough left over to live a reasonably good life. The lessons we can draw from Zacchaeus include a reordering of priorities and a philosophy of enough. How much is enough?

The topic of the week is the Uncertainty of Surrender; although deVega never uses the word, surrender, in his lesson. Still, I think we can infer that what we are called to surrender is those priorities and values that are counterproductive to peace of mind and the enrichment of life and relationships.

One of the most overlooked—avoided might be more accurate—one of the most avoided spiritual disciplines is “Simplicity.” In contemplative vocabulary, simplicity is the opposite of duplicity. It implies single-mindedness as contrasted with double-dealing. Having integrity as contrasted with being two-faced. Honesty, rather than working both side of an issue for one’s own benefit.

Richard Foster writes, “Simplicity is freedom. Duplicity is bondage. Simplicity brings joy and balance. Duplicity brings anxiety and fear. The preacher of Ecclesiastes observed that ‘God made man simple; man’s complex problems are of his own devising.’ (Eccles. 7:39, Jerusalem Bible).”

When we reach a point at which we're able to surrender those values and priorities of our own choosing that lead to stress and anxiety, we begin to experience the liberation God brings through simplicity, and we become aligned with the words of the old Shaker hymn:

It's a gift to be simple,
It's a gift to be free,
It's a gift to come down where we ought to be,
And when we see ourselves in a way that's right,
We will live in a valley of love and delight!

When true simplicity is gained,
To live and to love we will not be ashamed,
To turn and to turn will be our delight,
Till by turning, turning,
We turn 'round right.