

“A Glimpse of Jesus”

Luke 19: 1-11

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When Dr. Jennifer Harvey spoke on Friday at the Michigan Conference’s Annual Meeting, she referenced Zacchaeus. She reminded us that when it comes to finding someone we identify with or look to as an example for how to lived, Zaachaeus is our guy. She said we should take off our W.W.J.D bracelets and put on a W.W.Z.D bracelet because “What would Zacchaeus do” is a more honest rubric for our lives. I appreciated this reframing because the imperfect Zacchaeus is more relatable to me than the always-saying-and-doing-the-perfect-thing-for-the-perfect-moment Jesus.

We are not told anything about Zacchaeus' character in the Gospel story of Luke. We know his job, tax collector, but we don't know if he was kind to his mother and doted on his children. We don't know if he was the kind of person who checked on his elderly neighbors or if he was the kind of person who his neighbors avoided. We know he is financially wealthy, but that doesn't tell me enough about his spirit because we have seen that there is a huge difference among the wealthy. The Gospel story doesn't tell us if Zacchaeus was closer to a Warren Buffet or a Donald Trump.

We can assume that Zacchaeus made compromises in his life in order to gain his success. We can assume that because that is something every one of us has done. Zacchaeus was the product of a society that told him success was defined by his wealth. And, in order to be wealthy he needed to work in a field that, unfortunately, would involve sometimes – but not all the time – taking money and taxes from people, and punishing the ones who were not able to afford them.

Zacchaeus broke no laws and wasn't a thief or a crook, but he lived in a culture that told him in order to get ahead and have his needs met, he needed to be willing to set other people and their needs aside.

While I may not make compromises as obvious as the ones Zacchaeus made, there are strong parallels between his situation and ones I often find myself in. For example, when it comes to grocery shopping I try to eat as local as possible, as organic as possible, and support businesses that pay fair wages to their employees. I am faced with three options that are a half mile from my home: Do I go to the local health food store Foods For Living, do I go to the local East Lansing Food Co-op, or do I go to the sexy new Whole Foods? All have organic food with varying selection, all promote local farmers with varying success, and all seem to pay fair wages to their employees to varying degrees.

The Co-op is perhaps the most ethical choice and in most need of my business, but in going there I am committing to also going to at least one other store to find all of the items on my list. Depending on my time or patience for grocery shopping, that quandary leads to compromise. What usually happens is that I feel too racked with guilt to go from the Co-op to Whole Foods, so I bypass the entire triangle of local, organic stores and inevitably end up at Meijer. It is convenient to forget my original values with Meijer's affordable prices. And to be clear, I'm not springing for Meijer's organic produce unless I can't find the chemical-laden-but-dollar-cheaper-per pound counterpart. More compromise.

And that's just grocery shopping. How often do I drive out of my way to use the gas station with the best environmental record? How many of my clothes are sweatshop free? What do I know about the salary paid to the men who work for the tree trimming company I hired? What are the worker conditions at the hotels I stay in? Does it matter if I eat a biscuit from Chick-fil-A even though the corporation doesn't support gay marriage or women's rights?

Do I only watch tv shows and movies that prominently feature people of color and women? How many compromises and justifications can I make before someone can look at me the way they looked at Zacchaeus and label me as a sinner who has sold other people upstream for my own benefit?

I see Zacchaeus as someone, like many of us in our contemporary world, who made small compromises in his life and before he realized it and after it was too late to leave it, ended up in a profession that benefitted the Roman government over his own people. It's easy to dismiss him as shrewd or unethical, but the reality is that could have just as easily been me in that story.

Luckily, Jesus sees something else in Zacchaeus. Jesus sees a man who wants to meet him so bad that he climbs up into a tree just to get a glimpse of him as he is passing through the crowded town square.

When Jesus notices Zacchaeus, he recognizes more than the job title or the bank statement or the compromises – he sees someone who is willing to take a risk in order to have an encounter with Jesus. That willingness and desire are all Jesus needs to know about him in order to invite himself over to Zacchaeus' house. Jesus assumed the best intentions from Zacchaeus and with little information to go on, believed in his spirit and his worthiness.

After being boxed in by so many others, I imagine this would have felt like a welcome relief. How long had it been since someone saw the inner desires and workings of his heart instead of only seeing the work he did to get by in the world? How long had it been since someone asked to come to his home, to spend time with him? Jesus' openness and easy acceptance moves Zacchaeus to make a change. He donates half of his wealth to those who need it more than him, and pays back anyone he might have defrauded, paying back not just what he took but four times what he took. By simply assuming the best in Zacchaeus, Jesus inspires him to stop compromising and to start living out his deepest values and convictions. Zacchaeus

breaks out of the single-minded narrative of success that the wider world tells him to work for, and he instead focuses on what his faith tells him to do. He does not make this change because of the judgement that others put on him, but because of the love that Jesus offered him.

I believe the message in this story is part of the reason why so many of us seek out places like Edgewood United Church. This is a place where the Zacchaeus' of the world can gather together, in search of a glimpse of Jesus, in search of a gentle, loving acceptance that sees us for our whole selves. A place where we struggle with the compromises the world asks us to make and know that we are not alone in the struggle. This is a place where we come hoping to see and be seen, and leave inspired to give of ourselves and give of what we have in order help someone else. Zacchaeus did not give away his wealth to assuage his guilt or wipe clean the slate. He gave because once he was with Jesus, once he was in touch with the moral compass that guided his life, he was inspired to make a change. It did not make up for the wrongs he had committed, but it allowed him to move forward in a new direction, one that meant less compromises and more authentic living.

Zacchaeus is my hope for each of us. That in this place we will find what we are searching for, and that we will be seen for our whole, messy, beautiful selves. I hope that when this happens, we too will be inspired to give away that which we have acquired for ourselves, that we will be able to gift others in a way that helps them feel loved and cared for. If not through Edgewood, then to and through the people and places that inspire you and help you to live as Zacchaeus was finally able to live: fully, authentically, and without compromise. Amen.