

“Unraveled: Uprooted and Unearthed”  
Luke 19:1-10

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I love Zacchaeus. When I picture who Zacchaeus might represent in our world today, I picture each one of us on December 31, 2019. That was the night the world echoed with New Year’s resolutions not just for the year 2020, but for a new decade. Promises were made, many silently, some recorded in journals or shared with loved ones. Resolutions were formed to hit the gym, eat more vegetables, save money, quit smoking, travel more, and to generally live life to the fullest. Collectively we said, “2020 is going to be my year! This is it! A new decade. A new chance.” It was a moment of looking inward for personal betterment to become the best version of ourselves. It was a moment when we were full of certainty, confident in what was to come, clear in the direction for our lives. We had no idea what was ahead for us.

On that night we were like Zacchaeus, who was by all accounts successful with a high paying government job and hope for his future. Sure he exploited the poor and benefited from a corrupt system, but Zacchaeus wouldn’t have seen it that way. He would have believed he was doing what he needed to do to get ahead, to find economic security, and to become the best version of himself. I imagine that Zacchaeus was confident in his future and felt like he was going in the right direction. He had no idea what was ahead for him.

Zacchaeus’ life changed when he climbed a tree to see this radical new voice people were talking about, to get a glimpse of the man called Jesus. When Jesus saw Zacchaeus up in the tree he offered him an invitation saying, “Come down, for I must stay at your house today.”

Jesus' do-good liberal friends did not like this invitation, did not think it was fitting for one who stood on the side of the oppressed to stay in the home of their oppressor.

Zacchaeus must have realized this too because in that moment, he declares: "I will give to the poor. To everyone I have cheated, I will repay with interest. Give me a chance to make things right." Jesus gives him that chance. Jesus offers Zacchaeus salvation, new life in God that will point him toward a life of love from that day forward.

This change happens to Zacchaeus in a matter of moments. He goes from thinking about himself and how he might get ahead to reorienting his life toward those he has harmed, to reconciling with his past and leading a just life moving forward.

Zacchaeus is lucky that this change happened in just moments, but because for the rest of us modern Zacchaeus', we have been living out this change in slow motion over the past three, four, six months. The gym is closed. We've all started Victory Gardens so in Michigan that means we have about 5-8 more weeks before we can dig into our vegetables. We're in an economic crisis so many folks are living with uncertain or reduced incomes instead of saving money. No one is traveling. Instead of remaining focused on these individual pursuits, a shift has happened. We are reorienting toward the complex needs and realities of our communities. In the isolation of our homes we reconnected with community, became aware of the injustices that keep us separate from one another, and resolved to make changes. We have been invited down, to open our hearts to a new life in God that will point us toward a live of love from this day forward.

Over the past few months as our personal lives unraveled, we found the energy to ignite conversations about inequities in healthcare, to demand living wages for all workers, to raise awareness of who we are calling on to be first-responders or front-lines workers and what the

cost is to their lives, safety, and health. We made changes in our personal habits and behaviors, not just for our own safety but for the safety of neighbors and strangers alike, donning masks in public and staying home as much as possible, working together to keep everyone safe.

Locally we've fought against old habits of be "Midwest nice" and have risked conflict by continuing to wear masks and remain socially distant even as some people fight for their right to do what they want without concern for their neighbors. I have witnessed a resolve to stand strong to protect those who are most vulnerable even when it means personally feeling uncomfortable. Each individual action may feel small, but collectively it is a profound transformation. We are asking ourselves over and over again, "Who needs assistance? Protecting? Who is vulnerable or exploited?" The answers have been intersectional and multi-layered, drawing us into the realities and struggles of lives that often go unnoticed, amplifying voices that had previously gone unheard, marching alongside those who have asked us to join them knowing that for too long the invitation was ignored. Saying, "No more. I will show up. I know better so I will do better."

And even that dichotomy of us and them has faded away. I have witnessed folks realize that when their neighbors are harmed by injustice, they are harmed. I have seen white people begin to express the ways a culture of racism has cut them off from their own humanity. Why they feel compelled to act and bring change in our community not because it's the nice thing to do, but because they realize that when one person suffers, we all suffer.

We have changed these last few months. Like Zacchaeus we have come down from the treetops where we could safely watch or pontificate without getting too involved. We have come down from the treetops where we could watch the parade of justice pass by without getting caught up in the conflict ourselves. We have come down from the treetops and said, "Here we are. We will give back what we have wrongfully taken. We will reorient our lives and our work

to care for all people. We will tune our hearts to voices of the oppressed and move those who have been on the margins into the center.” We have come down and left behind “I” to lock arms with a faithful “we.”

What a start of a new decade. Two months ago we began this worship series on what happens when our lives unravel. We started by focusing on all that had gone wrong or was unexpected and trying to make sense of it, trying to find God or hope in the midst of confusion and despair. We end this series having realized that unraveling also means uprooting what is wrong or evil in our world. Unearthing social poisons that have created suffering not just in the early days of this decade, but in the decades that have come before.

We know now God has been here all along. God has invited us to turn away from our own self-interests and toward our collective humanity. To make this decade one where justice-seekers take up space and upend the way things were. Where we stop compromising for personal gain and start righting the wrongs in our institutions, our government, our so-called public safety, our schools, our churches.

When things start to unravel, it’s a time to reflect, to listen, and to act. It’s a time to call on our faith and move back toward community, knowing that together we will weave together something more powerful than existed before. Amen.