

“To Be Seen”
Luke 19:1-10

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One of the most common questions I am asked is from folks who wonder, “Which version of the Bible should I be reading? Which one is the best?” The answer I always give is, “Whichever version inspires you to read the Bible! There is no best.” There are interpretations of the Bible that serve different purposes, and it’s a helpful exercise to read the same verses from multiple versions to see what the differences and similarities are. There are translations with very formal language, laced with thees and thous all the way to poetic translations that are more focused on telling the story than the using the historically accurate language.

In worship we tend to use New Revised Standard Version, a translation that is considered a scholarly translation but sometimes we switch to Common English Bible when its language cuts to the heart of a story more quickly.

Whichever translation you use, it is important to remember that no one version is infallible. They all have their flaws and quirks that make them best used with a second version nearby to compare and contrast. Take today’s story for example: there is one word in the Gospel story that, depending on the translation of the text, changes the entire meaning of the narrative. This is important because is a frequently told, popular story about Jesus. There is even a church school song some of us may have grown up singing.

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...

The story goes that Zaachaeus is part of a crowd who knows that Jesus is passing through town and longs to see him. Zaachaeus is the chief tax collector, which means he is the boss of all the other tax collectors and he's rich, both of which are supposed to indicate he's a bad dude. Because Zaachaeus is short, he can't see over the heads in front of him that block his view.

This rich man risks humiliation from the crowd by climbing up into a tree. Tree climbing doesn't sound so embarrassing but imagine a businessman on Wall Street, in his power suit, surrounded by people who respect and fear him, suddenly climbing up into a tree. People would think there was something wrong with him and would be quickly trying to distance themselves.

Jesus sees Zaachaeus and with his odd behavior, he sees something else. Jesus connects with him and tells Zaachaeus he is going to his house. The crowd starts complaining that Jesus is going to hang out with a sinner, presumably instead of any of them who are more deserving.

Here is the part that changes everything:

The NRSV translation we read today says that Zaachaeus gives a speech, "Look, Jesus, I will give half of my possessions to the poor. I will pay back everything I've defrauded four times what I owe." Jesus responds saying salvation has come to this house, and he has come to seek out and to save the lost. In this translation, Zaachaeus saying, "I *will* give half of my possessions and I *will* pay back everything" makes this a story about Zaachaeus' transformation from the big, bad tax collector to a good, saved follower of Jesus. It's a personal transformation. It's a very popular telling that reminds us of the power Jesus' love has to transform someone's life and actions from greed to generosity. It challenges us to do the same - to think about the compromises we have made in the name of getting ahead and follow Zaachaeus' lead to change.

The problem is that the Greek verb that the NRSV version says means "I *will* give" and "I *will* pay back" doesn't exist anywhere else. The translators made it a new verb tense to make

this version of the story make sense. It is more commonly translated, as pointed out by renowned Jewish scholar and New Testament expert Dr. Amy-Jill Levine, as a present tense verb.

(I bet you didn't think you were going to get a grammar lesson today. I promise its worth it.)

Dr. Levine points out that it is more consistent when the verbs are translated as "I give" and "I pay back," meaning these aren't changes that Zaachaeus is inspired to do upon meeting Jesus, they are things he already does.

This change in verb tense means that the crowd is grumbling at Jesus for signaling out Zaachaeus. They don't like this guy. All they see is a sinner and they don't understand why Jesus would want to go to his house. Zaachaeus is defending himself to the crowd, explaining that yes, he is a tax collector and a rich man, but he also practices incredible generosity. He gives half of his possessions away. He pays people back four times what he owes. He does more than anyone else in that crowd does to live a life of generosity and perhaps that is why Jesus signals him out.

The implication isn't that Zaachaeus is the one that needs to change. The implication is that the crowd is the one that needs to change. They need to change the assumptions and stereotypes they have made about Zaachaeus. They need to change the stories they tell about what he deserves or what his worth as a person is. They need to change the stories that describe themselves as righteous and worthy and put Zaachaeus in a little box labeled sinner. Based on this translation, it isn't Zaachaeus that is lost and needs to be saved, it's everyone else.

With the change of one verb tense, it becomes a much more challenging interpretation of this Gospel lesson. I would rather be a misguided and saved Zaachaeus than part of the crowd who is grumbling and not able to see any of the good works he does in his life. I'd rather be up in a tree than get caught stereotyping someone or defining them by one aspect of their life. But, isn't that harder story much more like the challenges of real life?

We're a week away from a major election and with each passing day I can feel the tension in air increasing. Our mailboxes and email inboxes are overflowing with desperate pleas from politicians. I am only watching my old DVD collection for the next week because I'm tired of seeing advertisements carefully designed to rile me up. Because they aren't just trying to tell me how to vote, they are trying to get me to hate every person who votes against me. That's the language they use. Not vote a different way. Votes against me. As if someone is casting their ballot thinking, "I'm only doing this to ruin Liz Miller's life" instead of casting a ballot that reflects their deepest held values and beliefs, the same way I do.

It's easy to reduce people's worth or value in our life based on the boxes they check in an election. And that reduction stays with us long past Election Day - it has the potential to divide families, fracture workplaces, and split our state apart. The more we define each other based on the way we vote, the deeper our divides become. The more distant we grow from each other. The more it becomes about us down in the crowd feeling superior to that sinner or bigot or small-minded nobody.

Now, I know this is easier in theory than in practice. Believe me, I know. This year in particular we are voting on ballot measures that will have very real consequences in people's lives for years to come. We are afraid of the consequences of this election and before it is even decided, we are looking for someone to blame when it doesn't go our way. This is why the challenge to meet each other in our humanity, to acknowledge the differences while seeking the best in each other is even more important.

I'm not telling you to go to your family reunion and bring up in politics in the spirit of trying to understand each other. And I'm not sending anyone into a space where what people believe or how they act is a rejection of your own humanity and worth as a child of God. I'm

wondering what it looks like for us to not define each other by the part we like the least. What does it look like to remember the person behind the ballot, to define them not by party lines but by the way they serve in the community or the way they love their children or the way they practice generosity in quiet but extravagant ways.

I believe Jesus is calling us to pay attention whenever we start to think that we are part of the good crowd and that guy up in the tree over there is the one who got it all wrong. He is the sinner, not me. He doesn't deserve to host Jesus, I do. In our certainty that we have perfectly defined everyone, arranged us into the correct categories and drawn a thick line separating one from another, that is the sign that we are the ones who are lost and need saving.

We're not so different than Bible translations. As soon as we start to think we have found the best one, the most accurate one, the most scholarly one, someone looks deeper and says, "Hold on there. I've found a discrepancy that changes everything. You've been reading the story wrong the whole time." The stories we've been telling about each other have become too immutable. Too simplistic. Too narrow. It's time to look at each other with fresh eyes and a new perspective. It's time to invite Zaachaeus down from the tree and say, "Hey, there's a spot up front for you where you can see better." And maybe then, we will stop feeling so lost. May it be so.