

“Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?”

Luke 19:1-10

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Today’s text reminds me of a Charles Dickens novel, *A Christmas Carol*. You recall Ebenezer Scrooge was the main character in that play. He was the richest man in town, but also the most despised because he was so selfish and rude. After three ghostly visits on Christmas Eve, he changed his attitude and lifestyle, and he became one of the town’s most generous benefactors and respected citizens.

It was not ghosts who paid Zacchaeus a visit, but an itinerate preacher on his way to Jerusalem to observe Passover. That surprise encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus resulted in the same kind of change Dickens described in Scrooge’s life.

Zacchaeus was not a popular man in the lovely town of Jericho. As a matter of fact, like Scrooge, he was probably the most despised. He was the chief tax collector, which meant he was a part of the burdensome and corrupt Roman tax system. For sure, Zacchaeus did not live up to his name, which meant pure and righteous one. He appeared to be everything but a model of integrity and compassion.

When Zacchaeus heard Jesus was passing through Jericho, he climbed a sycamore tree in order to see him. Because Zacchaeus was a short man, he would struggle to see over those in front of him, so he sat on a tree limb to get a better view.

There is a bit of irony and humor in the way Luke tells the story. In all likelihood, Zacchaeus was surrounded by poor people in that tree because they commonly ate the figs which grew on Sycamore trees. It was not a high quality fig, so rich people avoided it. You can imagine many people looked twice when they saw the wealthiest man in town sitting at a poor man’s lunch counter.

When Jesus approached the tree in which Zacchaeus sat, he paused and told Zacchaeus to come down immediately because he was going to his house. Surprisingly, Zacchaeus offered no resistance, but he promptly descended that tree and escorted Jesus to his home.

I can only imagine the reaction of the people as they watched Zacchaeus and Jesus walking shoulder to shoulder to Zacchaeus' home. They had to be shocked, dismayed and irritated. Jesus bestowed a degree of honor upon Zacchaeus that none felt he deserved.

Luke does not tell us about their dinner conversation, but he does share the results of it. As their time together was ending, Zacchaeus stood up and said, "Look, Lord, here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor. If I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

To his delight, Jesus responded by saying, "Today, salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost."

Why do you think Jesus singled out Zacchaeus the day he passed through Jericho?

There were plenty of people he could have visited who would have been more religiously and socially acceptable. Surely, Jesus knew he would be criticized for going to Zacchaeus' home.

Yes, he did, but Jesus was more concerned about transforming lives than shoring up his reputation. He was always looking for ways to bring outcasts back into community, even though he was criticized for doing so by the religious authorities who valued ritual purity over listening to people's stories with the hope of redeeming them. Jesus was never content with ignoring outsiders or pushing them farther away as many people did. No one was worthless or hopeless to him.

I also think Jesus wanted to offer Zacchaeus a different vision and purpose for his life. Up to this point, Zacchaeus' life seemed to be all about him.

Jesus wanted to broaden his vision to include others. The potential for doing good deeds that Jesus saw in Zacchaeus was probably unmatched by anyone in Jericho, and Jesus felt compelled to help Zacchaeus see the difference he could make in so many of his neighbors' lives and embrace it.

Jesus was aware of something else that day. This would be the last time he would pass through Jericho. If he was going to talk to Zacchaeus, it was now or never. There would not be another opportunity to have this conversation and offer this alternative way of thinking and living. This was why Jesus said to Zacchaeus, “Today, I **must** stay at your house.” You can hear that sense of urgency in his voice, I’m sure.

Why do you think Luke included this story in his gospel? It appears to me he wanted to use Zacchaeus’ story to teach them about money management and to inspire them to use their resources to help those who were struggling. This doesn’t surprise me. Jesus talked about money more than any other topic, and Luke wrote about money more often than the other gospel writers.

Specifically, what did Luke want his readers to take away from this encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus? I pondered this question last week and want to share some ideas for you to consider.

I believe Luke wanted his readers to know how they earned their money was important to God. I am intrigued by what Zacchaeus said to Jesus at the end of their time together. “If I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”

What does that statement tell you? It tells me he had been dishonest, and Jesus confronted him about it. It also tells me he wanted to make it right.

Perhaps some of Luke’s readers were being tempted to be dishonest in their business dealings, which was unacceptable to Luke. Under no circumstances was the first generation of believers to lie, cheat or steal to fatten their pocketbook. They were called to live by a higher standard, the ethic of love, and they were to let The Golden Rule guide their decisions, especially in the marketplace. So are we.

We, too, must never forget the way we earn our money is important to God. If we own our own business, we need to be honest, just and fair in our dealings with others, including our customers and employees. On the other hand, if we work for someone, we must be dependable, loyal and trustworthy. The health and stability of every community are dependent upon this level of integrity, as well as the validity of our Christian witness.

With this in mind, if Jesus sat down at your kitchen table with you this afternoon, would the subject of integrity come up? Would he confront you over your financial dealings with others?

Have you been deceptive and exploited others? Have you not been fair and just? Has your obsession with money led you to abandon your principles, misplace your priorities and disregard the welfare of others?

We were not created by God to live this way, and when we do, we pay a high price. We alienate many, if not all of the people around us, and we end up living miserably in a prison of our own making.

I believe this is probably where Zacchaeus was the day Jesus met him. I also believe it is where some of us may be today, and if so, I pray this story will speak to us about the changes we need to make.

Why else do you think Luke shared this story with his readers? **I believe he wanted them to know how they spent their money was important to God.**

Certainly, God wanted them to be responsible and disciplined so they could take care of themselves and their families. They needed to be good managers of their money, which would enable them to pay their bills and honor their financial commitments. At the same time, they needed to be unselfish and help those who were struggling to make ends meet.

I get the feeling Zacchaeus was not doing this. "Here and now, I give half of my possessions to the poor," Zacchaeus said to Jesus. I believe Zacchaeus had a little catching up to do. For too long, life had been all about him and his desires, with no thought of what others needed.

I wonder what Jesus said to Zacchaeus that melted his heart. I've never been quite this persuasive.

Maybe he helped Zacchaeus to understand the deepest longings of his heart would never be fulfilled by amassing a great fortune or surrounding himself with all the things money can buy. Instead, his need for meaning, purpose, guidance, direction, peace, security, confidence, courage, self-esteem, joy, forgiveness and the assurance of eternal life could only be found through a close relationship with God and loving relationships with those around him.

Perhaps he opened Zacchaeus' eyes and helped him to see what he gave to help others would bring him more happiness, peace and pleasure than what he would keep for himself. Nothing he could buy to add to his possessions would compare to the joy he would feel knowing he made a difference in someone's life because he shared with them what he already had.

Whatever Jesus said, he convinced Zacchaeus it was more blessed to give than to receive. Immediately, Zacchaeus shared one-half of everything he had with the poor.

If Jesus came to your house this afternoon, would he look around at all you have and ask how you are using it to alleviate poverty and make your community a better place for all people to live? How would you respond if he asked how you are using your money, possessions and influence to feed the poor, clothe those who are cold, house the homeless, heal the sick, educate children and care for the elderly?

If he asked to see how much you give to the church to support its many ministries, would you be eager to show him? Perhaps this is something you should ponder this week, and if in doing so you discover you need to make changes, there is still time.

I think this is another reason Luke included this story in his gospel. **He wanted his readers to know it was not too late for them to change their values, priorities and lifestyle.** If Zacchaeus could do it, so could they.

Is this the good news you need to hear today because...

...you have not been honest in your dealings with others and need to make amends for this. With God's help you can.

...you have not been as good a manager as you should have been and need to be more disciplined and responsible. With God's help you can.

...you have not been as concerned about your neighbors as you should be and need to be more generous and benevolent.

With God's help you can, and I hope you will because I am confident others will follow your lead, just as Zacchaeus' family followed in his footsteps.

Ask God to help you take that first step this morning.

