

Stephen R. Shaver

Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

October 30, 2022

Year C, Proper 26, Revised Common Lectionary

[Isaiah 1:10-18](#)

[Psalm 32:1-8](#)

[2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12](#)

[Luke 19:1-10](#)

+++

C rejecting being called little: “I’m big”

Calling me little: “Hi, little Daddy!”

Something very gospel about that: the last shall be first, the small shall be big

Gospel passage today full of reversals

Zacchaeus: a big man in many ways: a *chief* tax collector, and *rich*

But like a child: small in stature, *runs* ahead, *climbs tree*, most undignified behavior in his passion or curiosity to see who this Jesus is

Might remind us of what Jesus has said just a chapter ago in Luke:

“No one will enter the kingdom of God unless they enter it as a little child.”

Zacchaeus used to being looked down on, literally and figuratively

Small in stature, and seen as a sinner because a tax collector

Might remind us of last week’s parable from Luke: tax collector who looks down at the ground in penitence

Jesus *looks up* at him, and then welcomes him but again in a backward, reversed kind of way: he invites himself to be Zacchaeus' guest. Zacchaeus will be the big man, providing the hospitality, and Jesus will be the recipient, though it's clear where the initiative lies.

There are still more surprises to come.

Jesus goes to Zacchaeus' house and the people grumble. They know what we too as readers have come to know well, after all these parables and stories about tax collectors: a tax collector is severely morally compromised. He is a bad guy. He has grown wealthy by serving as a tax collector in an exploitative system, serving as the representative of the Roman colonizers.

And yet when he hears the people grumble about him, Zacchaeus seems to defend himself. And his defense is honestly pretty good!

Now here is where our Bible translation from the original Greek into English can present a problem. NRSV: "Half of my possessions I *will* give ... and if I have wrongly taken anything, I *will* return it fourfold." Future tense, making it seem as if Zacchaeus is repenting of his bad ways and setting a resolution to make amends in the future. But those future tense verbs aren't in the Greek at all. What it says is, "Lord, I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have wrongly taken anything, I return it fourfold." While it's not completely clear, many scholars believe Zacchaeus is simply telling Jesus about his ongoing habitual behavior. This is what he practices as how he conducts his affairs. And I think this reading of the parable is more compelling. The seeming traitor to his people and minion for Rome is actually a covert champion of generosity.

Here we are in a season where we are asking all our members to look closely at our own practice of giving. No matter how wealthy or poor we are, it is possible for us to give away some portion of the money that God puts into our hands. There are

some who can give 2%, or 3%, or 5% of their income away. There are some who can give 10%, and that's a benchmark many of us find useful because it's grounded in the Hebrew Scriptures and it's appropriately challenging for many of us. But there are some who are indeed wealthy, who have all the necessities of life and many of the pleasures, and for whom it's appropriate to stretch beyond that 10%. Zacchaeus, we learn, has advanced far in his practice of percentage giving and gives away 50% of everything he has.

One of the concepts I admire from the Buddhist tradition is called "right livelihood." It's the principle that you should earn your living in a way that's in keeping with your values, and there are certain professions that observant Buddhists, at least traditionally, are supposed to not engage in. Zacchaeus seems to me to flunk the right livelihood test. And yet as we dig deeper into our own livelihoods we might discover the uncomfortable truth that all of us are in some way embedded in economic systems that oppress or exploit others. From the clothes we wear to the food we eat to the fuel we burn to keep warm or transport ourselves around, we make choices, some better than others. But in the world we live in today, just as the world of the ancient Roman Empire, we are unable to extricate ourselves from the sinful systems that dictate power relationships and economic relationships that harm parts of God's creation and God's people. How are we going to live with that truth? I don't know. I don't know whether Zacchaeus, for example, will leave his profession as a tax collector. I do believe in the meantime his practice of radical generosity and scrupulously making amends where he knows he has done another person wrong makes him the best kind of tax collector there can be. It's a start. It's a sign of God's kingdom breaking in.

And God's kingdom breaks in in another way when Jesus, in the sight of all the people, chooses Zacchaeus, this social outcast who has come to him like a child, to feast with at the table, and symbolically resituates him as a member of the community, part of the network of relationships, an outcast no more. Salvation has come to this home indeed, in the person of Jesus, who doesn't just pass by the street waving but might at any time invite himself into your home, up to your table, into your life, as he has for us, as he does for you.