

***The Gospel of Luke,
a Theological Application to our Lives***

Fr. Konrad Shaefer, OSB
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Luke 19:1-10. Zacchaeus, Before and After

Context in the Gospel

- 18:1-8. Parable of the Persistent Widow and the Judge
- 18:9-14. Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (“Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled...”)
- 18:15-17. Saying on Children and the Kingdom
- 18:18-23. The Rich Official ... who became sad
- 18:24-30. On Riches and Renunciation (camel and the needle’s eye)
- 18:31-34. Third Prediction of the Passion
- 18:35-43. Healing of the Blind Beggar, received sight and followed
- 19:1-10. Zacchaeus the Tax Collector
- 19:11-27. Parable of the Investment of Gold Coins
- 19:28-40. Entry into Jerusalem

¹ He entered Jericho and passed through the town. ² Now a man there named Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector and a wealthy man, ³ was seeking to see who Jesus was; but he could not see him because of the crowd, for he was short in stature. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see Jesus, who was about to pass that way. ⁵ When he reached the place, Jesus looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house.” ⁶ So he came down quickly and received him with joy. ⁷ When they all saw this, they began to grumble, saying, “He has gone to stay at a sinner’s house.” ⁸ But Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, “Behold, half of my possessions, Lord, I shall give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone I shall repay it four times over.” ⁹ Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house because this man too is a descendant of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost.” (≈ NAB)

Observations of the gospel:

- Jericho, the plaza, the shopping mall, the business world and the resort
- In a parable people left the holy city of Jerusalem to descend to Jericho; in Jericho, a blind received his sight (18:43)

- Etymology of Zacchaeus, from ancient Greek Ζακχαῖος, from Hebrew זָכַי (*zakkay*), literally “pure, innocent,” which came from the verb נָחַץ (“be clean, pure”). The “short stature” is both physical and moral.
- Tax collector and wealthy, of particular interest to Luke (12:16-21 and 16:1-8)
- The episode begins and concludes with the verb “search”; at first Zacchaeus “seeks” to see Jesus (v. 3); in the end Jesus reveals himself as the Son of man come to “seek” and save what was lost (v. 10). The encounter happens out of love of Jesus who overcomes every obstacle as he “seeks” Zacchaeus, whose initial search is purified and come to fruition; generic curiosity is transformed into a joyful reception of Jesus and the conversion of a public official, confirmed by the pledge to amend his ways. The Benedictine is one who *seeks* God.
- Note the vocabulary for movement. Jesus *entered* the town and *was going through* it; Zacchaeus made his appearance, *ran ahead*, and *climbed* a sycamore tree to *catch a glimpse* of Jesus. Jesus *looked up* and spoke to the shrimp up in the tree; he said, “Come down quickly”; he quickly descended.
- Twice **σήμερον**, today:
 - o 2:11, *Today* in the town of David a savior has been born to you.
 - o 4:21, *Today* this scripture has been fulfilled even as you listen.
 - o 19:5, *Today* I must stay at your home . . .
 - o 19:9, *Today* salvation has come to this house.
 - o 22:34, 61, “I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows *today*, you will deny three times that you know me”
 - o 23:43, *Today* you will be with me in Paradise.

Two glances converge, one from below, the other from above: little Zacchaeus climbed the sycamore tree to get a better vantage point, and the Son of God descended from heaven in search of those of small stature. Two glances with one thing in common, the search –to seek Jesus who seeks to save the lost (vv. 3.10).

Jesus and Zacchaeus meet, divine mercy contacts miserly, midget humanity. The “son of Abraham” collaborated with foreign political interests.¹ That quisling,

¹ Zacchaeus, short of stature, had risen high in the financial world. One might say that he was overly conscious of his small size, and thus he compensated for his inferiority complex by making a lot of money. He used extortion, the usual practice among the functionaries who bid for a contract with the occupying Romans to collect taxes. The wealthier he became, the more the public despised him, caught in a vicious circle that many people who suffer from low self-esteem get trapped in. The more they seek others’ recognition, the more isolated they become. Zacchaeus, the little giant of the tax collectors, carved out a name for himself by belittling others. By elevating himself, he separated from them. He needed the encounter with Jesus to envision things differently and change his attitude.

rebel sheep had ascended the ladder to an executive position among the fiscal officers. The now head honcho had been bought –shades of Levi-Matthew, disciple of Jesus. When Jesus was passing through Jericho, the midget “wanted to see” him at any cost. But, on account of his size –physical stature reflected in his moral character– and hampered by the crowd, this little-big guy ran ahead and climbed a tree, a ridiculous perch from which to satisfy his curiosity, and meet a man, raised up and hung from the tree of the cross, would save humanity.

Had Zacchaeus earlier caught wind of this Jesus who had cured a blind person in Jericho? If the blind can be healed, why not a shrimp? Look at him in the photos, where shorties are always in front and “tallies” behind. But outside the photos, Zacchaeus had to stretch to see things right. Somebody was always in his way. So, for once, he ran ahead and climbed a tree to catch a glimpse of the rising star descended from heaven.

Might Jesus also have desired to see Zacchaeus? The gospel says nothing other than “The Son of man has come to seek and save what was lost” (v. 10). But how could he miss a mighty mouse of a man mounted like a target in a sycamore tree or like a rare bird that lights in the park and grabs everybody’s attention. Children climb trees, squirrels and raccoons scramble up trees, but a fiscal functionary? Unheard of! All Jesus had to do was raise his gaze, and that’s what he did. The gaze cast by the fisher of men caught a shrimp in a tree.

As we saw in the healing of the blind man in Jericho, the Greek word *anablepo* (v. 5) means “look upward,” “contemplate transcendental ideas”, or even “restore the sight”. Jesus raised his eyes to see a short man high in a tree; he glimpsed heaven in a human being (an unlikely place); he saw the face of God reflected in humans. This produced a new sensation in Zacchaeus who acquired a new stature. In Jesus’ look, he discovered his true dignity which filled him with joy.

And what a sight! Zacchaeus was accustomed to harsh looks, judgmental, evasive eyes, scorn and mistrust. Rarely did anybody look at him a second time, and anyway these stares were supercharged with contempt: look there, a traitor to Abraham’s race. Because people avoided him, Zacchaeus had sealed himself off in

his career. Except for that one day when curiosity got the best of him, and he climbed a tree to see Jesus.

Jesus' attitude and look were different from all the rest. He fixed his gaze on Zacchaeus and embraced the personal history of loneliness, aloofness, greed, and need. Suddenly Zacchaeus was shaken out of his comfort zone. This look was so different from the fierce glares. Maybe Zacchaeus had reached the point of ignoring the piercing looks, for the numbing pain that came with them, though he knew in his heart that he deserved cold contempt. But now, a look that neither hurt nor condemned, but rather opened his wound to heal. Jesus' eyes embraced him, melted his metallic heart, and invaded his aloof loneliness. Up till now as a public official he had exploited his uniform, a crook tolerated by his victims. But Jesus' look, like that of the Father, who "makes his sun rise on the bad and the good and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust" (Mt 5:45), did not discriminate between sinners and the blameless. Jesus had come to Jericho that day to seek the sick not the healthy, to save sinners not the righteous.

Suddenly a profound consolation entered Zacchaeus, and he could hardly believe it. Neither could the crowd believe their ears. What next? Was Jesus really speaking to that scumbag? But Jesus not only saw Zacchaeus; he paid attention to him, called him by name, as if he had come to Jericho because he had an appointment with the executive tax official in a sycamore tree.

There's more. Jesus not only addressed the miniature big-man but invited himself into his home: "Zacchaeus, come down now,² because today I must be a guest in your home." Suddenly, a heartfelt peace spilled over into joy. Zacchaeus scurried down and received the guest who had invited him into his own home, and his hospitality was more than just foot-washing or a cup of coffee, a coke, or afternoon tea. His testimony? "Lord, half my belongings I will give to the poor, and if I've cheated anybody, I'll repay him four times as much." Imagine, a politician returning what he had skimmed off from extortion and bribes! This is not

² Jesus calls him by name. "Zacchaeus, come down. Hurry!" And the midget who wanted to be tall, descends, lands (gets grounded), connects with his humble, earthy nature (*humilis*). The transformation occurred not on the vertical axis but on level ground. Based on his contact with Jesus, the earthly man was transformed and discovered his true nature. Zacchaeus experienced salvation that friendship with Jesus affords; he assesses his own life on a deeper level, from a different point of view: "Zacchaeus, hurry down, for today I have to stay at your home."

a matter of a penny-pinching ten per cent, close fistedly counted out, like the Pharisee of another gospel, who with his fasts and tithing pretended to be righteous before God and acceptable in the eyes of his neighbor. Zacchaeus commits himself to four times more, a gesture that testifies to his conversion and proves he gives his very self to Jesus, in the person of the swindled and underprivileged. For Zacchaeus the bonus was to receive Jesus and be invaded by that wondrous look, and, on his part, to respond to others with the same grace that Jesus had awarded him. Generosity consists not in giving what is leftover, or giving what somebody deserves, but giving the very self. Mercy always pays the debt that misery might owe.

Thus, the glowering Pharisees grumbled between their teeth, “Look how Jesus visits the house of a thief.” For sure, Zacchaeus was corrupt, but no less deserving of mercy, and Jesus’ declaration rings true: “the Son of man came to seek and to save what was lost.” Only one remedy mends the tear and wound of sin: mercy, always bigger than our miserly heart, and always abundant where sin is found. Like the lady at Jesus’ feet in Simon’s house, first, the grace of pardon, and what follows is our grateful response. Forgiveness, then love. One day in Jericho, Jesus sought the sinner, who, once found, imitated Jesus and remunerated the victims of his double-dealing.

The gospel not only announces the good news of mercy but invites us to offer the same mercy to our confreres and guests. What does Saint Benedict counsel: “*By most fervent love therefore let monks exercise this zeal, that is, let them prefer one another in honor. Let them most patiently tolerate their infirmities whether physical or of character*” (RB 72). Let us rise from our littleness, open ourselves to the heart of mercy, so salvation might come and lodge in our heart and home.

As we place ourselves in Zacchaeus’ shoes, we receive a new identity and rejoice that Jesus, *today*, has fixed his gaze on us and called each of us by name. Our eyes, once fixed on our blessed “self,” are opened, and we look first to Jesus (“Zacchaeus... kept trying to see Jesus”, v. 3); afterwards we perceive human nature as it is. Jesus receives us and invites himself into our homes. This story

invites us to conversion. Zacchaeus, changed in attitude and behavior, is overjoyed, and thus achieves greater appreciation of human worth.

This gospel is not just about little Zacchaeus who wanted to see Jesus, branded by his contemporaries as unworthy of salvation. It speaks to Luke's community. Who of us doesn't seek Jesus? Who would not go out on a limb and gladly receive Jesus in his home, and, in exchange, receive and duplicate the salvation that Jesus freely offers?