



April 6 - Zacchaeus

How do you see Zacchaeus? As you hear this story, what is your impression? Imagine there is a spectrum ranging from 1-Zacchaeus as a deplorable tool of the empire who receives unimaginable grace to 10-Zacchaeus was doing his job and was misunderstood. Was he completely taking advantage of his fellow Judeans by overcharging taxes, or was he being fair but could not break the social stigma? Where do you see him on that spectrum?

The truth is, you can back up any point in that spectrum within the text. They are potentially all correct. As Jesus is passing through Jericho he stops and heals a man who was blind. As Jesus moves on from that healing, we are introduced to Zacchaeus. He is introduced as a chief tax collector and rich. As the chief tax collector, he was the one gaining contracts with the Roman Empire and promised set amounts in collected taxes. He would then supervise others who would collect the taxes. He amassed wealth in the process. It is easy to see him as a chief deplorable in this text.

It is just as easy to see the other end of the spectrum. His communication would have largely been with the Roman Empire and with those working for him. He would supervise others who would then find ways to collect the promised taxes. It is possible that if the wrongdoing happened, he was unaware. To go a step further, in verse 8, the Hebrew text is in the present tense, not the future. It is translated as future tense, pointing toward a change of heart. Some commentators believe he is stating his current practice. I give half of my wealth away, and if I have wronged anyone, I will repay four-fold. It is as if he is saying, "Invite Rob Sand to look through everything. Give me an audit."

Both ends of the spectrum hold truth, and both are a captivating storyline. On one end you have "Annie," confronting Mr. Warbucks, or Mr. Stacks, depending on the version you watch. It is a beautiful story about someone who strives for financial success and discovers happiness is found in his relationships with others. The other end of the spectrum tells the story of Willy Wonka. It is a person who is misunderstood because he never interacts with others, then turns out to be a very caring and philanthropic person.

The way that we see Zacchaeus says a lot about us. If we view him as the top bad guy, we end up wallowing in self-righteousness. We start to deceive ourselves by looking at the perceived flaws in others more than our own. It is a dangerous game. It is what the Rev. Nadia Bolz Weber spoke of when lining up the "Red State Revival." It is about becoming liberated from self-righteousness.

When we look at Zacchaeus as simply misunderstood, we start to lean so far into mercy that we start to lose any sense of holding others accountable. Whether well intentioned or not, some of the behaviors were causing harm. When we only look at the mercy needed while avoiding everything else, we perpetuate the behaviors.

When we look at both extremes, we can start to see the flaws and the way that we overlook truths within the story. Mr. Warbucks treated many people harshly. He softened when it came to Annie. Willy Wonka put people through a series of questionable tests before ever showing his true motive. He was deceptive and hurtful. As the Lenten theme highlights, it is about Everything in Between.

We started with the question of "How do you see Zacchaeus?" The more important question is "How did Jesus see Zacchaeus?" I believe there is a reason why the gospel writer paired this story with the story of the blind man. One is wealthy, the other a blind beggar, but both live on the margins. Neither can see Jesus, but Jesus sees them. Both are "saved" which in look speaks of being restored into the community. What is it about each of these men that draws Jesus' attention? If we try to see the crowds as Jesus sees them, who might catch our attention? Amen

Pastor Michael Schmidt