

When our daughters were little, they loved watching an animated show called Veggie Tales. They spent hours laughing and singing along with Bob the Tomato, Larry the Cucumber and Madam Blueberry, including one song that was about this passage: “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.”

Now, it may surprise you to hear that this happy little ditty captures just about everything that most Christians know about Zacchaeus. As hard as it was for that wee little man to see Jesus, it is perhaps all the harder for us to see Zacchaeus! Theologians and scriptural scholars are only now starting to see him more clearly. There are some intriguing clues in the details of this story that shows up only in Luke, and a little exploration reveals an astonishing result.

Luke begins this passage with Jesus entering Jericho, the last town before Jerusalem. At the end of this same chapter, Jesus will ride into Jerusalem at the peak of his popularity where he will cleanse the temple and draw the attention of the authorities.

But why does Luke situate this story specifically in Jericho?

Veggie Tales characters, Bob the Tomato and Larry the Cucumber, also tell a version of story of Joshua and the Jericho Wall. It’s a sweet story that, appropriately for children, leaves out two adult details. First, Joshua cursed Jericho and anyone who tried to rebuild it. And second, before he destroyed the city, Joshua rescued a prostitute because she helped the Israelites. She was one of Jesus’ ancestors named Rahab. And so there is an echo from Hebrew scripture in Luke’s choice of a location: Jericho is an evil place where notorious sinners find God and are saved.

That’s an important piece of the puzzle, but why did Luke choose to *name* this wealthy tax collector? He didn’t name the tax collector or the Pharisee in the parable we heard last week. This is the only time the name “Zacchaeus” appears anywhere in Christian scripture. The name means “clean, pure or innocent.”

This story is connected to the parable we heard last week. But instead of last week’s self-righteous Pharisee who has *separated* himself from God, this story presents Jesus freely *reuniting* Zacchaeus—innocent and pure—to the

family of Abraham and Sarah. Instead of a Pharisee looking *down in judgment* on a tax collector, this story gives us Jesus *looking up in mercy* at a tax collector in a tree. In contrast to last week's hated tax collector who went to God's house to pray for mercy, this week Jesus goes to a despised tax collector's house in a cursed city to grant mercy and proclaim that salvation has come.

Luke's emphasis on tax collectors is also not a random choice. The rancor that people felt toward tax collectors is not related to the frustration that we feel in the complexities of our modern systems of taxation. In the ancient world, people assumed that everything valuable in life existed in limited quantities and had already been distributed. Whatever honor, land, blood or money that people had was all they were meant to have. This zero-sum mentality meant that not only were no new resources forthcoming, but that anyone who gained only did so as someone else's loss.

Having said that, it is also instructive to know that Luke's reference to Zacchaeus as a "rich" man did not necessarily mean he was greedy. In the eyes of ancient Palestinians, "rich" people were those who did not have to work. As a chief tax collector, Zacchaeus had hired agents who did his work for him. And it is true that his job as a chief tax collector put him deeper into the heart of the oppressive and corrupt tax system of the Roman Empire. But that's all that the crowd surrounding Jesus, including the apostles, could see of Zacchaeus.

The wee little Zacchaeus is hard to see. But we do notice his desire to see Jesus, so intense that it caused him to run right through the risk of ridicule and embarrassment. Luke has Zacchaeus climb a sycamore tree, a symbol of the "tree of life." And that is where Jesus says to him, "Hurry and come down. We must go right now to your house where I will stay."

Zacchaeus eagerly accepts Jesus with joy. But the crowd disapproves.

Jesus has presented a dilemma to them. They despise and distrust Zacchaeus, but, at least for the moment, they honor and believe in Jesus. Watching Jesus go to break bread and stay with Zacchaeus troubles them. If they want to keep holding Jesus in high regard, they must stop despising Zacchaeus, whom Jesus has just elevated in status. Or they can continue to despise Zacchaeus, but that would mean they'd also have to change their regard for Jesus, whom they are assuming will take his power on as the ruler of

Jerusalem next week during the Passover. But honor, like money, is a limited resource in the minds of the crowd.

Who will lose if someone else gains? The question hangs in the air, foreshadowing the actual events of the week to come as the same people who will acclaim “Hosanna” during his triumphant entry to Jerusalem will then change their chants to “Crucify him!” during his trial.

These are some of the people witnessing the exchange between Jesus and Zacchaeus this morning. They grumble. And we, for centuries, have joined the complaining choir in perpetuating an unfair characterization of poor old Zacchaeus. We don’t see him, we don’t hear him. We judge him.

In response to all our griping about his sinfulness, Zacchaeus stops the procession to his house and publicly renounces the accusation. Now, what we heard Zacchaeus say this morning was “I *will* give to the poor and if I have defrauded I *will* pay back fourfold.” This seems to satisfy us that Zacchaeus has set things right. Surely, his promise to do right in the future has brought salvation to his house. Right?

But that’s not what Zacchaeus said. In Luke’s original Greek text, what Zacchaeus says is in the present tense. Something more like this: “Behold! Half of my possessions, Lord, I *give* to the poor, and *if* I discover cheating, I give back fourfold.”

This is rather astonishing! Zacchaeus gives away a mind-boggling percentage of all that he owns. For those of us who struggle with a 10% tithe, 50% is breathtaking! And whenever he learns that he or one of his agents has inadvertently cheated someone, he pays back 400%. Mosaic law demand that the amount cheated must be restored with 20% interest and only required 400% from convicted criminals.

But can you hear the echoes of the Pharisee from last week? Do you remember the Pharisee talking about how he fasts well beyond the prescribed teaching, and how he tithes even resources that are not required? Everything about the outwardly observable behavior of the Pharisee last week suggested saintly devotion, but his heart was closed to God and to his brothers and sisters. Everything about the outwardly observable behavior of Zacchaeus this week

suggests corruption, but his heart was open to God in Jesus Christ, even though he was himself despised by his brothers and sisters.

The clear message that we could make into a Veggie Tales story is that surface appearances can be deceiving. And that is true. But we've also unearthed a deeper insight so incredible that it eludes us. Jesus has sought, found and saved a notorious sinner named "pure innocence" in the evil city of Jericho.

Yet, standing in the presence of Jesus, even Zacchaeus is stuck inside a perspective of insiders and outsiders, winners and losers. He wants to be with the good people—the insiders, the winners—and so defends his genuinely righteous behavior to Jesus. But Jesus stops Zacchaeus dead in his tracks. Jesus reminds Zacchaeus and all those listening that he came not for the winners, but for the lost, the least, the little and the dead.

And therein lies the insight too slippery for the simplicity of Bob the Tomato and Larry the Cucumber: Salvation is not *caused* by our behavior or on our pursuit of perfection. Our behaviors adjust as grateful *responses* to the dawning awareness that salvation has come to our house. Jesus Christ gave that salvation freely, once and for all, on the cross.

Perhaps Zacchaeus had to taste his own lostness to sharpen his yearning to see Jesus. Perhaps that unguarded moment of vulnerability in the tree of life is how Jesus was able to see Zacchaeus—to see Zacchaeus as Jesus sees us—with the loving regard that recreates us and makes us whole. What you and I do with our life does *not* save us. What Jesus did with *his* life does. The Risen Christ *is* the Resurrection and the Life. And when we begin to see the emerging outlines of that astounding reality, the most appropriate response is to drop to our knees and gratefully receive it with joy.

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