

Isaiah 1: 10-18
Psalm 32: 1-8
2 Thessalonians 1: 1-14, 11-12
Luke 19: 1-10

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A Saint Who Surprises

May the words of my mouth and the mediations of my heart be acceptable to thee, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. AMEN.

Back in the dark ages, when dinosaurs and some of us roamed the earth, when “Godly Play” made folks think of celestial choirs and not Laurel Mosteller, there was Vacation Bible School... and while there still is...just like Sunday School, it's had some upgrades.

But when I was six years old, in a church basement in Erie, Pennsylvania, I had my first starring role in Vacation Bible School I played the son in the Prodigal Son. No, not a girl, not a child, not but a *boy*. When my moment came, I bolted across the room saying, “Father, Father! And he said, “My son, my son!” I was thrilled. A mini Meryl Streep that no one had ever heard of because she was probably six years-old, too.

And it was about the same time that I learned the words to a song about Zaccheaus, which I bet many of you know and like me, have never forgotten. He was a wee little man, who climbed up in the tree, to see, of course Jesus.

Jesus tells Zaccheaus to come down, because he's going to his house and this news makes Zaccheaus very happy.

And there the story ended for a lot of us for decades. And it's hard to imagine it as being a bold and provocative text because it's been tamed by its familiarity.

Zaccheaus, is a Jew, who exploits and extorts his own people on behalf of the repressive Roman Empire. A cheat and a robber. Not at all like us. Upon seeing Jesus, Zaccheaus has a sudden conversion and promises to change his ways. That makes us feel good because seeing is believing. We are quick to judge and so sure that our righteous is 20/20. It's a safe place to be since it asks nothing of us. A classic story of redemption, neither bold nor provocative.

But here's the catch, according to Biblical scholar Dan Clenindin:

There's another way to read this story in which Zacchaeus isn't a sinner who converts but a saint who surprises. He doesn't make promises about the future, rather, he defends himself and shocks the crowd by appealing to his past.¹

¹ Clenindin, Daniel, *Journey with Jesus, A weekly magazine*, 10/23/22

So he becomes a saint who surprises. Doesn't that peak your interest? It did mine.

Translating the Bible is one thing. But then there is the art of interpretation. There are serious Biblical commentators who say that the meaning of this text is best understood by interpreting it in the *progressive* present tense, and not the future. This means there is serious scholarship that supports both the traditional interpretation of the text: as redemption. The second interpretation in the progressive present tense tells a story of *revelation*.

See how everything flips if you imagine that what Zaccheus actually said was “Lord, I have *always* given half of my wealth to the poor, and whenever I discover any fraud or discrepancy I *always* make a fourfold restitution.” Zaccheus is stealth. A surprising saint not to Jesus, but to the crowd which was swift to demonize him because he was tool of the Romans.

But Jesus *recognized* him for who he truly was-- a surprising and stealth saint who lived up to the meaning of his name which is “Righteous.” And that sycamore tree? In the ancient world it symbolized transformation and redemption. Zaccheus was in a sense right where he belonged—we, like the crowd, were blinded by our judgments.

Writes Episcopal priest, Elizabeth Kaeton:

Jesus is once again turning our world upside down, confronting us with our assumptions about who is good and who is evil and demonstrating for us the tricks we play in our minds before we treat one another one way or another. Like the crowd murmuring about Zacchaeus, it is easy to be blinded by our prejudice of 'those people' and find ourselves accusing the very person or people we should be emulating.²

While it's true that Zaccheus was wealthy and it's likely that some of his wealth was due to his role as a tax collector. But even if that's true, there's been change and Jesus recognizes who Zaccheus is now and striving to become.

And wouldn't you want Jesus to judge you by your present and not by your past? To see you as a work in progress and not the sum of your worst habits and mistakes in the past? This is how God sees us—for who we truly are.

I once looked through the eyes of God—by accident—and it was revelatory to me. I was a TV producer then, and doing a piece for ABC News “Nightline” on how fishing trips with my brother, Mark, taught me to appreciate the brother I have—one who is developmentally disabled—rather than I brother I had grown up wanting instead. He was judged all the time—called things like “retardo.” Kids tried to make him eat words by telling him they were spaghetti. If your brother is different, so are you. I wanted to fit in instead of stand out.

Fishing taught me about Mark's gifts, where were noticed on the fishing boat by a man who buddied up with him for the day. I included him in the piece, saying that my brother's life is “an invitation to the world to be kind” and he responded.

Several weeks after the piece aired, I got a letter from the man, also named Mark. He said he had something to tell me which was that he'd just served 17 years for murder in NJ—that he'd

² Kaeton, Rev. Dr. Elizabeth, “Trick of Treating with Zaccheus,” All Saints Rehoboth Beach, DE, 10/31/10

committed when he was 17. Shortly after he was released, he had no way to cope with the world he was a stranger to and started using cocaine in violation of his parole and got busted. He faced going back to prison for a long time.

But the judge who sentenced him had seen “Nightline” the night before.

She saw how kind he had been to Mark and sent him to rehab instead of to prison. Rehab worked and he’s now selling and repairing air conditioners in North Carolina.

Had I known about his past, I would been wary, quick to judge like the crowd who had judged Zaccheaus. But by accidentally looking through the eyes of God, something was revealed and I saw who he’d become: a kind, kind, man who couldn’t do enough to make sure my brother had a fantastic day fishing. He thanked me for saving his life and I said he was wrong. He saved his life by being kind. I just noticed.

This leads us to a questions posed by Rev. Kate McDonald:

Who is Zacchaeus for us today? Whose views do we disagree with? Who would we not share a table with? Whose lifestyle do we not approve of? Whose manner offends us? Whose actions and words cause us anxiety? Whose work do we despise? Who do we think should repent and beg the most for forgiveness?

Whatever names and faces just came to your minds remember this isn’t a story about Zacchaeus but about God; this isn’t a story about repentance but about revelation.³

And above all, remember the saying that goes, “When you draw lines about who’s in and whose out, remember where you’re putting Jesus.” AMEN

³McDonald, Rev. Kate Reynolds, Scottish Episcopal Church, Jerusalem, 10/30/2016

