

“What’s In A Name”
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October 31, 2010
Text: Luke 19:1-10

Many of us know this story. It's even a favorite for some of our kids. It's a great story about a little man who was surprised by Jesus message of God's radical acceptance of him. Please notice what Jesus *didn't* say. Jesus didn't say, “Zacchaeus, if you give half your wealth to the poor and pay four times the penalty in restitution, I'll visit at your house.” He just said, “Zacchaeus, hurry, today I need to stay at your house!”

The place was, Jericho. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem for the last time. The man was Zacchaeus, whose name was mud among his neighbors. And so it seems fitting to ask this morning, What's In A Name?

Who was Zacchaeus? A chief tax collector. The Capo, the head of a legion of tax collectors. An outsider not well-liked by his neighbors, at least by the commentators in this crowd. They would assume perhaps he made money the way Tax Collectors made money; by overcharging and gouging. He would have owned the franchise for the local tax

collecting business. It turns out we didn't invent outsourcing, the Romans did. They would find a local to do the unsavory work of collecting taxes. He would prepay the tax bill and then have it collected piece-meal. He was the poor sap who made it possible for the Romans to not get their hands dirty by actually interacting with the people they over-ruled. And then, because this arrangement put him in the spotlight, he was the rich sap who had friends neither among the taxpayers nor among the powerful for whom he toiled. Why he longed to get a spot where he could see Jesus would have been a mystery to those who heard this story that you yourselves have just heard.

But, if we switch gears and look at it from Zacchaeus' p.o.v., this is a different scene. This was going to be, for Zacchaeus, an amazing day. An astonishing day. Maybe he hoped to see Jesus on the qt, secretly, hidden. But when Jesus called to him, he suddenly entered into a profound vulnerability. Rich man up a tree! More than one commentator notes the vulnerable and undignified position this put him in.

What's in a name? When Jesus called to him, Zacchaeus

might have pretended Jesus called another...but for the fact that there was no one up in that tree with him...and Jesus did call him by name.

Now, this is an astonishing story because Zacchaeus goes with the flow, he doesn't try to recuperate his dignity, he remains open, vulnerable. And, here the text presents some problems. First, time travels quickly. In the breath of a single verse we are moved from the treeside to the hearthside. Verse 6, he hurried down [from his perch in the tree] and welcomed him. That's from the tree to the home. All who saw this grumbled and affirm this transition in the story saying, He [Jesus] has gone to be a guest, etc. So, it must be at the house, perhaps at dinner that Zacchaeus stands to make his short speech. And here's where the text get's troublesome. Or, shall we say, here the text provides us with a very interesting decision and opportunity. The way we have just heard it, Zacchaeus is described having responded to the generosity of Jesus' presence by promising that he will give his gift of 50% to the poor and 4 times repayment of any breach of justice he might have committed. It sounds very much like a promise about how

Zacchaeus will act, in the future. Like a change of heart. A new direction.

The trouble is, that's not what the text says. What the text reports Zacchaeus saying is I give (present tense, present reality) half of my goods to the poor, and that I return (present tense, present reality) 4 times restitution to anyone I discover has been defrauded. In other words, in many renderings of this passage, the statement is his testimony of what Zacchaeus has been doing all along. Now we have something different. Something controversial. Now what we have is a Chief Tax Collector, who has been behaving admirably, even excelling in the observance of the religious laws, and yet still is excluded from his own community (labeled a sinner is all it takes to exclude someone from the worshiping life of the community). This becomes then a story of restoration. Indeed, even if we go with the reading that looks forward, as in "I will commence to repay fourfold" this is a story of restoration. But the tighter reading of the original language dramatizes this.

We have been so conditioned by the tradition of this story, that we don't see the story. This is a man who stood

at the margins, even though he has power. This is one who complied with the rule of the day and yet is ostracized. This is a person who was able to be extraordinarily generous, even as his neighbors scowled at him out of the stinginess of their heart. This is one of the lost that Jesus came to restore. One who has been faithful, but who is rejected by society.

So, I think it's safe to see Zacchaeus' astonishment and joy in all of this. He was arrested, his attention caught. Here was one who did more than merely tolerate him, Zacchaeus was used to that from the neighbors. This one, this Jesus, accepted him in the way that any of us would hope a loving God would accept us. *And in this arresting moment is everything we can know about giving.*

For if Zacchaeus became vulnerable and generous, Jesus modeled the same vulnerability. Remember the murmuring and grumbling about Jesus' choice of homes to visit? Jesus is pointing to God who enters into relationship in the same open way.

What's in a Name? Did Jesus call to him, Come down here Chief Tax Collector? Or did he call him by name? Does God not call to our deepest truest identity, or does God call

on the identity placed upon us by others? What's in a name?

We are in the embrace of a God who lures us into the open, out of our hiding place in the branches of the sycamore tree, into a place of nourishment and conversation and healing. For so many of us, this is also astonishing. Because some of you have been excluded, gossiped about, set aside, overlooked. Or if not yourselves, someone you know and love. Has been under-rated. Smirked at. Maybe they don't have all the religious stuff worked out, well welcome to the club. Maybe you can't see how it is we live the way we do while claiming we follow a higher authority, me too. Maybe all of this has got you up a tree, today, right now. We know this Zacchaeus thing. So it's important to remember that in the exchange between the divine and humanity, God has become vulnerable, too. Be encouraged by this. I know, I know, this doesn't play well against all the magisterial language we have about God the Toughest One and God the Know-It-All. But in the complicated language of a deeper conversation, when we move beyond the labels and the lingo, when we try to describe the point of contact we have with God in Jesus Christ, we speak of vulnerability. For what

can be more vulnerable for God than to move among us? I don't need you to believe or disbelieve, one way or another, about the divinity of Jesus for this to work. The point of the image is not doctrinal, the point of the image is this is a God who is open and available, highly interactive and highly relational.

And the point is that in Jesus, Zacchaeus finally felt God's own love and acceptance, and was released to be himself, a child of Abraham.

This is the meaning and depth of giving. We give in a mutual and reciprocal open relation with God. We give most when we suddenly are astonished by how much we've just received.

I am asking you today, then, to do an admittedly difficult thing. I am asking you to allow this little-man-up-a-tree story to become *your* story. To think about caring and serving and giving, not because you're supposed to or because it's something that you should do. To think about caring and serving and giving because you have been cared for so much by a God who loves you, that this is just a mutual response for a friend.

Wow, what's in a name?! What if we could to think of God as a Friend, instead of as a Tougher-Than-Everyone-Else entity or a Supreme Know-It-All? That's kind of what happened to Zacchaeus. He was up in that tree, maybe expecting some kind of celebrity, some kind of rock-star teacher/guru type. The word was out on Jesus, people lined the streets to see what would happen next. And instead of a superstar, Zacchaeus made a new friend. And I like to believe that Jesus used that friendship as a kind of pointer, a kind of example of what it could be like to be a friend with God.

Out of that experience, Zacchaeus was brought to fullness of his being, fullness of his identity, and I would like to believe he was also restored in the eyes of his community.

So, What's in a Name? Zacchaeus, the small guy who was despised by his neighbors, the tax- and graft-collector, his name means "Pure." Isn't that great? Jesus may have chuckled to himself, as he called out to him. I wonder, did people hear him call out, "Zacchaeus!" Or did they hear him say, "You there, 'pure one,' today I must dine with you!"

In what ways has God caught your attention? Astonished

you? Surprised you by an abundance of generosity? Has God succeeded this week in letting you know that God wants nothing more than to be in a friendly relationship with you. You know, maybe we raise the bar too high on this one? God is and has been and always will be, your friend. Well, if God has caught your attention, let me ask you, are you going to come down out of your tree? As we consider together God's invitation to be people of Extravagant Generosity, how will you respond in mutuality to the love of God?

This pertains to us as a congregation as we enter into the home stretch of our Campaign of LIGHT, the Stewardship Drive for our program year 2011, and I hope that you will be completing your commitment to that campaign if you haven't already had a chance to. And, in a wider sense, this pertains to becoming open and available to God in all the aspects of our lives. We can no longer let muttering and murmuring keep us from the call we have received as sons and daughters of Abraham, committed to working in the world to bring about the sustainable realm of God's justice, equity and peace. It's time for all of us to come down from the tree, the Love of God as asking to enter your house today.

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When you have an opportunity to be a witness to God's justice and abundance, what will you say?

Amen.