

Luke 19:1-10
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Luke 19:1-10

19He entered Jericho and was passing through it. 2A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. 3He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. 4So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. 5When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” 6So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. 7All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” 8Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.” 9Then Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. 10For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

When I was in high school, all of the seniors had to take a class called “Senior Composition.” It was a class that was supposed to teach us how to write before we went off to college and had to write actual papers that made sense. I was dreading it. It was rumored to be really hard. And there was no harder teacher than the one I got, Carol Sweig. Mrs. Sweig was tough. We usually had to do a paper a week and one of the things that Mrs. Sweig couldn't abide were misspellings. If you misspelled a word, even just one word in your paper, she handed it back to you and made you change it. If you gave it back and it still had misspellings, you failed. And remember this was in the days before computers and spell check. You had to actually look words up in the dictionary! I struggled through that class, doing everything that Mrs. Sweig wanted, grumbling all the way. And for some unknown reason, Mrs. Sweig liked me. I worked like a dog in her class and hated all of it. Besides, I was going to be a pre-med major in college, why did I need to learn to write? But I got out of her class with a decent grade and went off to college and after one year of pre-med, I realized it wasn't for me and I switched to a major of religion and philosophy where we had to write papers all the time—expository essays, debate positions, exegetical papers explaining obscure Scripture passages, and the dreaded research papers. And I realized that I could do them all. Because God had sent me an unforgiving Jewish taskmaster

named Carol Sweig. It wasn't until years later that I realized that she was a saint. A gift from God.

You know those people. They may be people that you don't like, or that you don't even notice, but they are people that God uses to show his love, to tell the good news, to speak a prophetic word. Zaccheus was such an unexpected saint as well. There was no one more unlikely than Zaccheus. He was not only a tax collector and had become rich being a tax collector, become rich off the money of others, but on top of all of that, he was short! This was not an impressive figure of a man. This was not Charlton Heston or John Wayne or someone that Hollywood would choose to portray someone who was chosen by God. He was a short guy whom everyone hated. But it was this guy whom Jesus saw that day in Jericho, this guy out of all the other people there that Jesus called to and said, "Zaccheus, come down. Let's go eat at your house today." And immediately the people begin to grumble. Why would Jesus go to his house? Doesn't he know what kind of character he is? But Zaccheus is filled with excitement and gratitude. And in response he says that he will give away half of what he owns to the poor and if he defrauds anyone, he promises that he will repay that person four times what was lost. See, just by Jesus coming to his house, Zaccheus changes into a good man. Or does he? It turns out that there is an interesting translation issue in this passage. The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible has translated a particular verb in the future tense "I will give to the poor." But the verb can also be translated as "I am giving to the poor." Which does Luke mean? Does he mean that Zaccheus has changed because of the presence of Jesus and now he will be generous to the poor? Or does he mean that Zaccheus is already generous to the poor, that he already gives half of his wealth to the poor? Does he mean that Zaccheus is misjudged by the rest of the people because he is a tax collector, because he is rich, and because he is short? Is he being lifted up as an example of the life-changing power of Christ, or is he being pointed to as an example of unseen generosity? Is Zaccheus one of those unexpected saints, a person we would never think of, who all of a sudden bursts into our lives as an example of God's generosity and grace.

Grace is the the sometimes unexpected and always undeserved blessing of God. Mrs. Sweig was a sign of God's grace in a crazy world as as I was learning how to write. Zaccheus was an messenger of God's grace to the people of his time, showing them how easy it is to misjudge someone and how a person of generous spirit can pass on their gifts to others. Who are the saints in your life? Especially, who are the saints that you didn't expect, didn't even like? But who somehow made you better. There is an old saying from the Buddha, "Imagine that every person in the world is enlightened but you. They are all your teachers, each doing just the right things to help you." God send us one another, and sometimes he sends us Zaccheus. A person that we ignore or at least overlook. He's short—he doesn't look like someone God would send. He's a tax collector, which means he's greedy, unprincipled and has no compassion. But this is the very person that Jesus goes to his house for dinner. And our hypocrisy is highlighted. It turns out that Zaccheus has been giving to the poor all along and we didn't even know it. It turns out that we judged him on his looks, on his background, on his profession, without knowing anything. Zaccheus was the saint that God sent to teach us. Who had God sent to you to be your teacher? Or maybe you are the saint that God has sent to someone else?