

An Act of Resistance

Luke 19:1-10

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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He 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.”
(NRSV)

I

When I was a child, we sang a song about Zacchaeus in Sunday school. Perhaps you know the song: “Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he. . . .” One detail about that song puzzled me. Why did the songwriter emphasize Zacchaeus’s height? Yes, I know Luke 19 says Zacchaeus was “short in stature” (v. 3). Still, why did the songwriter use that phrase “a wee little man” twice? Neither the gospel of Luke nor the author of the children’s song say why it’s important to mention Zacchaeus’s height.

Two thousand years ago when Luke sat down a stylus and sheets of papyrus to write his gospel, he could safely assume that he and his readers all shared the same cultural assumptions. However, we are living in a different culture. Consider the McDonald’s hamburger. All of us in this culture know about McDonald’s hamburgers. A modern writer doesn’t have to explain what a McDonald’s hamburger is and the associations it has with the culture of cars, eating while driving, a fast-paced lifestyle, and Happy Meals for children. We already know that stuff without being told. But imagine what would happen if Luke, or Zacchaeus himself, could come back to life and join us in modern America. He would have no idea what a McDonald’s hamburger is. Indeed, a Luke or a Zacchaeus who came back to life would be overwhelmed by thousands of unfamiliar things. Just imagine what Luke or Zacchaeus would think of smart phones.

These cultural differences also work in the opposite direction. Luke and Zacchaeus shared a ton of knowledge about first century Mediterranean culture that you and I know very little about. Scholars of various kinds have worked hard to piece together a coherent picture of how first century Mediterranean culture operated. Many things about that culture are mysterious to us because we don't have enough literary and archaeological evidence to fill in the details. Still, we do know some things—and one aspect of first century culture that we know something about is how short people were treated. In a word, they were treated badly.

II

The first type of evidence comes from Roman jokes, in which short people were often objects of ridicule. For instance, one joke made fun of a poet named Philetas of Cos, who supposedly was so short he had to wear heavy metal balls on his feet so the wind wouldn't blow him over. Another example are the jokes that public speakers told about short people as a way of getting easy laughs from the audience. In fact, Cicero, a famous Roman orator, wrote a handbook that has an entire section on how a public speaker can use other people's physical deformities to make an audience laugh.¹

A second type of evidence comes from the association between sin and physical deformities, including shortness. The New Testament itself shows how first century culture associated physical disabilities with sin. As just one example, look at John 9:1-2, where Jesus and the disciples meet a man who was born blind. You might remember the first question out of the disciples' mouths: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (v. 2). As with blindness, so with shortness. Many people of that time, whether Greek, Roman, or Jewish, suspected that the gods had to be displeased with anyone born with congenital "defects" like shortness.² If someone was short, or deaf, or born with legs of different lengths, or whatever, then the gods surely were angry with that person.

¹ Mikeal C. Parsons, *Body and Character in Luke and Acts* (Baylor University Press, 2011), 100.

² Parsons, 101-104.

At the same time, people in the ancient world were fascinated by people with physical oddities and callously put them on display. A physically-deformed slave sometimes sold for three times as much money as a slave in perfect physical condition. The Roman emperors Nero and Domitian supposedly collected people with physical deformities as you would collect trophies. Emperor Augustus put on display a young man named Lycius who measured two feet tall and weighed only 17 pounds. The same emperor also bought a dwarf that he gave to his niece as a pet.³ We don't know how short Zacchaeus was, but we do know this is the kind of world he lived in.

A third type of evidence has to do with people who were excluded from worshiping in the Jerusalem temple. Leviticus 21:17-20 says this:

¹⁷Speak to Aaron and say: No one of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the food of his God.¹⁸For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, ¹⁹or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, ²⁰or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles. (NRSV)

If this text was enforced in first century Judaism, then Zacchaeus was probably excluded from all worship in the Temple. Though he was Jewish, the priests would not have allowed him inside simply because he was short.⁴

All this evidence suggests that Zacchaeus was forced to live at the margin of society just because he was shorter than other people. Throughout his life, he may have heard many cruel jokes about short people; maybe he even heard people make jokes about him. Perhaps people avoided him on the street because they thought God was angry with him. Perhaps he sensed that people were weirdly fascinated with his shorter body size by the funny glances they shot in his direction. And very likely, he was excluded from worshiping God in Jerusalem's Temple. Adding all this up, I'm guessing that Zacchaeus didn't have many friends. I'm guessing he felt lonely. I wouldn't be surprised if he had a

³ Parsons, 102.

⁴ Parsons, 104.

low self-image. Maybe one of the central questions in Zacchaeus's life was this: does God even love me?

III

Luke tells us two more things about Zacchaeus. In addition to being short, Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector and a rich man. We don't have enough time today to explore in detail the cultural meanings of these two things, but neither one made him a popular guy. Being a chief tax collector and being rich further alienated Zacchaeus from his neighbors. Jews, and in fact most others in the Roman empire, thought tax collectors were traitors. Tax collectors were considered to be cheats, scoundrels, snitches, and moles. They charged people more money than they needed to, and kept the extra for themselves. When people considered who to invite over for dinner, tax collectors were never on the list. Most people just didn't associate with rascals like that.

And rich people? Well, in the books of Luke and Acts, rich people frequently find it hard to participate in the new thing Jesus and the Spirit are trying to do. Two examples. "Woe to you who are rich," says Jesus in Luke 6:24, "for you have received your consolation." And in Acts 5, Ananias and Sapphira sell their land, which tells us they were rich enough to own land in the first place. Next they gave part of the proceeds to the Jerusalem church while keeping some of the rest for themselves. Because of their duplicity, and perhaps also because of their greed, they both died on the spot (5:1-11). In the world of Luke-Acts, it's doubtful whether rich people can really participate in the reign of God.

To sum all this up, Zacchaeus was a marginal man. He was short; he was a tax collector; and he was rich. Consequently he was an outsider—outside of social gatherings, outside of human connections, outside of the Temple, and from Zacchaeus' point of view, outside of God's love. The townspeople themselves sum it up in verse 8: Zacchaeus is a "sinner." As far as they were concerned, his shortness meant he was born a sinner, and by collecting taxes for the Romans and getting rich, he was living as a sinner.⁵

⁵ Parsons, 101.

IV

Now that we know something about the cultural context, let's look at what Jesus does. Jesus does something astonishingly simple: he invites himself to Zacchaeus' house. In this social situation, Jesus knows very well that Zacchaeus is never going to feel he has permission to invite Jesus to come over for a meal. So Jesus reverses the normal order of things and just invites himself. Here again we see one of the themes we've been noticing throughout this series on hospitality: that the role of guests and hosts can quickly shift around, depending on the context. Here Jesus makes himself a guest, but of course at a deeper level he's really the host.

Notice that Jesus is not just being tolerant. I happen to be a fan of tolerance in most situations, largely for pragmatic reasons. I would much rather have us tolerate each other than fight each other with guns. In this story, you might say that Jesus tolerates Zacchaeus. Well, yes, but I think that's a superficial way to interpret what Jesus is doing. In a more profound way, Jesus is practicing hospitality. Hospitality is about creating the conditions where people who don't know each other, and who may even dislike each other, can come together to forge new friendships. This is precisely what Jesus does with Zacchaeus.

Notice too what happens as a result of hospitality: Zacchaeus experiences a change of heart. He promises to give half his wealth to the poor. In addition, he will pay back the people he's defrauded, plus 300% interest. I hope we notice the gentle, low-key approach Jesus takes here. He never calls Zacchaeus a sinner. He never tells Zacchaeus what he must or must not do. He lays down no laws. He doesn't even try to convert Zacchaeus. Instead, Jesus just invites himself to Zacchaeus's house, and this act of simple hospitality, all by itself, does the rest. From this story it looks like Jesus' missional strategy is to form friendships, and then let whatever change needs to happen flow from the newness of those friendships.

V

The story of Zacchaeus shows how hospitality can become an act of resistance. By inviting himself to Zacchaeus's house, Jesus quietly and indirectly demonstrates where the real sin lies. The real sin lies not with Zacchaeus, but with the residents of Jericho and Jerusalem who believe that a man like Zacchaeus could never join God's movement. Jesus shows that God welcomes even the Zacchaeuses of the world. And Zacchaeus discovers that God, in the guise of Jesus, really does love him.