

Seeking Wholeness

Luke 19: 1-10

Sermon by Stephanie Wieand

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He entered Jericho and was passing through it. ² A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³ He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. ⁵ When 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." ⁶ So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. ⁷ All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." ⁸ Zacchaeus 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." ⁹ Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

In August I attended a school board meeting for Goshen schools at the new Intermediate building, right down the street from here. I had assumed that a top priority of people attending the meeting would be to discuss our kids' safety at school while the pandemic was raging and there was no mask mandate in place. But I was wrong.

When I walked into the room, there was a large group of people on one side of the bleachers wearing red. And in another section a group wearing purple, which I learned were local representatives from a group called the Purple for Parents of Indiana. From the mission statement on their website, this is a group who works to "bring awareness of and stop the conditioning/grooming of vulnerable children from all programs, including Comprehensive Sexual education and Social emotional learning."¹

During the open comments time of the meeting, individual after individual in purple shirts came to the mike, stated their Goshen address, and shared how programs in our public schools, such as critical race theory and sex education are harming our children. Many people shared passionately from this group and when each finished, they cheered loudly for each other.

Then there was the red group. The red group was comprised of educators and supporters who had shown up to defend public education. Several educators had also signed up to speak and share their pride in Goshen

¹ <https://purpleforparentsindiana.com>

schools and the good work that is happening in our classrooms. When these individuals finished, the red group clapped and cheered. The passions were high and at times there was hostility in the crowd between these groups.

I definitely had an opinion about who was right and who was wrong in that school board meeting, and I left feeling disheartened by the state of our community, mostly because of “them”.

This brings us right into the feelings of the crowd in our story for today. When Jesus says he is going to stay with Zacchaeus, the crowd begins to grumble and they call Zacchaeus a SINNER.

I have to wonder- does this crowd really KNOW Zacchaeus? We know he was rich and a chief tax collector, which was a very unpopular thing to be at the time. Some tax collectors even made more money for themselves by over-charging. So we can make some guesses about how the people felt toward Zacchaeus.

One thing they seem sure of- that he is a sinner. The use of the word sinner by the crowd helps to distance themselves from Zacchaeus in a big way. Clearly he is doing it wrong, making mistakes, and living his life in a way that is different from us. But I think that kind of name calling and pointing out someone else’s flaws clearly also says something about the crowd. So what is the state of this community?

In thinking about the crowd’s response, I wondered what I would have thought to witness Jesus sitting with those on the other side in the school board meeting, or inviting himself to the house of someone that I might think of as a “Sinner”.

I was imagining my own response, and thinking about our tradition of welcoming sinners and outsiders and the ways of Jesus, and I thought, yeah, I’d be glad to see Jesus reaching out to this man and spending time with him. How wonderful. Because clearly in meeting with Jesus this sinner would change his ways, and be more like Jesus... which is also the side I’m on, of course.

When I imagined what I would think about Jesus meeting with someone I might consider a “sinner”, or maybe just someone whose choices I disagree with, this is where my mind went- “yeah, I’d be glad”. But then I realized there was an assumption and motivation under the surface that isn’t so honorable. There were still clear sides to be taken and I saw

myself on the right side. I may have more in common with this holier-than-thou crowd than I would care to admit.

I can't help but notice the similarities between this crowd and our society as of late. The sense of division and brokenness, of grumbling and finger pointing is palpable. We are divided over issues of race, politics, and public health. We see division on the news and in our social media feeds. We've experienced it at our family gatherings.

When I walk around in the grocery store wearing a mask I tend to assume that at least some of the people who see me automatically dislike me for it. And maybe I felt the same way earlier in the pandemic when others chose not to mask for the safety of our community.

We likely all have differing feelings and opinions about the best way forward, including here at Berkey. And that's okay. That's to be expected. It's actually a form of diversity. But if we allow ourselves to dwell in a mindset that only looks outward, pointing at others, might we miss the grace of Jesus in the midst?

One thing I notice is that the crowd is putting an awful lot of attention on Zacchaeus and what they think is wrong about this situation. They came to see Jesus, but suddenly when Zacchaeus comes into the story, they lose their focus on Jesus and get distracted.

They are no longer *CURIOUS about who Jesus is and what Jesus is up to.* They know it all already. They know who the sinners are, and what the rules are, and that their ways are the right ways.-Like so many times throughout Jesus' ministry, the people do not yet SEE.

We also lose our focus sometimes. So how do we shift our gaze back toward Jesus? Maybe we can ask ourselves, Where is God in all of this? What is God up to? Sometimes these questions are a form of lament, when we feel that God is absent. But they might also help us be open to find the hope, and the grace that is here, even when it's hard to SEE.

Zacchaeus, the outsider, the "sinner" seemed to be very focused on Jesus. Running ahead, climbing a tree, Zacchaeus "was trying to see who Jesus was." He is driven by a sense of curiosity about Jesus. Something in him made him want to climb that tree- this curiosity, a deep longing?- surely the nudge of the Spirit.

Maybe we, too, have experienced this nudge of the Spirit drawing us in, to be curious, to come closer, and to look for God's presence among us.

While Aaron and I were living in Chicago after college we attended a Mennonite Church there and I was grappling with my faith. I had a lot of questions. And when I reached out to my pastor at the time, she invited me to join a spirit feast group of women who ate together and shared together monthly. These women welcomed my questions, my curiosity, my doubt, and in return they shared their own faith and I grew in mine. With their support and encouragement, I began to look more for God in my daily life, and I found that there were moments and glimpses of God's presence with me.

Several years later, I was again filled with curiosity and a nudge to learn more when I observed some of my friends who talked about faith in a way that was notably PERSONAL. And honestly, I didn't really understand what that was about. To have an intimate relationship to the Divine that came up in conversation and daily life experiences- This was a little bit different, and I wanted to know more. This curiosity began my journey into contemplative spirituality and into a deeper and more personal relationship with God. I truly believe that this nudge of the spirit, this subtle but powerful invitation is God calling us closer.

And Zacchaeus seems to feel it. Zacchaeus was curious and wanted to see Jesus, and Jesus also Sees Zacchaeus. Jesus has a way of noticing others, especially outsiders. When Jesus looks up at Zacchaeus and invites himself over, he blows through the barriers that the crowd thought should be there, offering connection and relationship.

And what's more, Jesus comes as a GUEST. He turns our expectations upside down of who should be host, of who we think has something to offer others. Jesus himself goes as a guest, as a recipient of Zacchaeus' hospitality.

And now we begin to see how this encounter with Jesus, *this touch of Divine love and welcome*, changes how Zacchaeus approaches his community. In an act of giving, of economic redistribution, Zacchaeus participates in restoration for his own community. *This move toward wholeness, toward reconciliation and reconnection with his community- and with God, is what salvation looks like for Zacchaeus.*

So what does salvation look like for the crowd? They may be distracted by Zacchaeus, but they are still there, witnessing this scene unfold. Might THEIR curiosity open up something new?

When Jesus announces that salvation has come to THIS HOUSE, because HE TOO is a son of Abraham, he is no longer talking to Zacchaeus, but rather addressing the crowd and inviting them into the story. Jesus invites the crowd to see that while Zacchaeus may indeed be a sinner, Jesus offers relationship and salvation- a way toward wholeness. Zacchaeus is included in God's embrace.

Is the crowd ready to join Jesus in such a broad and transforming welcome? And, if salvation is available to Zacchaeus maybe it is available for them, too. Maybe they can finally look at themselves, and see their own sins and shortcomings, no longer ashamed and hiding away in their finger pointing and grumbling, but bringing those things to Jesus. And wouldn't that begin to transform the community as well?

I'm not sure whether we are Zacchaeus or the crowd sometimes, or if we are wearing purple or red at that school board meeting. *But every one of us is continually invited toward wholeness.* And, like Zacchaeus, our own encounter with *Divine love and acceptance has the potential to influence* how we show up to others.

One question I find helpful is, "What's the most generous story I can tell about a person?" I can imagine the most generous story about Zacchaeus, about those in purple or red at the school board meeting, and about those making a different choice about masks or politics. It might not change them, but it changes me, and it could change what is possible. It's a practice of bringing the grace of God, the grace Jesus so quickly extends to Zacchaeus, to those we encounter. And this grace is available for us too, again and again.

We might wonder if this is a passive response. What about the potential for even feelings of anger to motivate us toward needed change in our communities? What about our calling to be prophets and speak out against injustice? Likely all of these responses are needed. We see Jesus showing up in all of these different ways in the gospels. *And*, there is also a desperate need for God's healing and grace and love in the midst. To be Christ's loving, caring, healing presence in the world.

We don't know what happens in this community after Jesus has come through and we don't know what is to come in our own communities. But we are characters in the story.

So where is our focus? Are we looking for Jesus?

How might we be generous and curious?

- About what God is up to
- About each other
- About ourselves

And finally,

If Jesus came to our house, what would salvation look like for us?