

**Humbly Grateful**  
**Luke 19: 1-10**  
**Jon Frost**

Today's Scripture lesson comes the Gospel of Luke, chapter 19 verses 1-10. Let us listen to God's word together.

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

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Please pray with me: O Lord may your word be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

"Are you humbly grateful or grumbly hateful? What's your attitude?" Anyone else know this song? I loathed it as a child when it was sung to me, or at me but I take great delight in it now as a parent. This happens a lot I find - as a parent you inadvertently find yourself re-encountering all kinds of artifacts from childhood. Sometimes the experience can be perplexing.

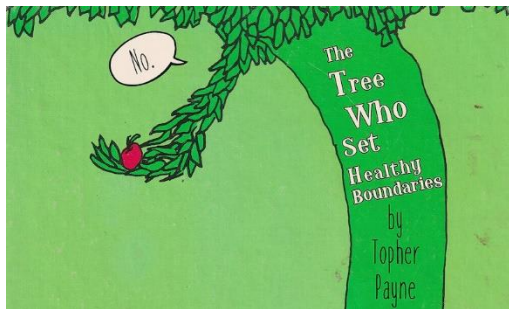


Take the story *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein. Do you know this story?

It's about a tree who loved a boy and gave her leaves, branches and shade to the boy so he could play and rest. But...spoiler alert, though it was published in 1964! The rest of the book shows various stages as the boy grows up and the tree continues to give - apples so the young man can make money, then branches so the older man can build a house, and then ultimately the trunk so the even older man can build a boat. It ends with this pathetic image of a lonely old man sitting on a sad little tree stump.

Zacchaeus was a climber long before he scrambled up that sycamore tree and even the way Luke introduces us to him hints at his ascent. There was a man; Zacchaeus; chief tax collector; rich. As a Jewish man, one of the only ways to become rich under Roman occupation was to collaborate with and help support an elaborate patronage system. Historian Diana Butler Bass writes, “While governors ensured that peace and prosperity flowed down from the emperor, tax collectors made sure that cash came up from the provinces to pay the military and enrich the noble classes in the imperial city.” In other words tax collectors helped to keep the wheels of empire rolling.

Zacchaeus wasn't just a tax collector. He was a chief tax collector in the important city of Jericho no less, which means he had worked his way to the top of a system in which corruption ran rife. He would have been seen as a traitor to his Jewish brothers and sisters paying their taxes and he would always be an outsider to the Roman elite above him in the pecking order. He had no community and was distrusted by all. But this was the script he had and from a certain vantage point it had worked out pretty well. But that's when Jesus came to town.



A headline caught my attention the other day. *Somebody finally fixed the ending of the Giving Tree.* As part of a fundraiser for Atlanta artists, playwright Topher Payne offered alternative takes on this and a number of other titles. In his rendition, *The tree who set healthy boundaries*, the dramatic shift hinges on the word “no.” The tree tells the young man no and really rebukes him for years of neglect and one-sided selfish demands.

Instead, the tree offers a way forward characterized by mutual giving so that both legacies will flourish for generations to come.

When Jesus comes to town, scripts are torn up and narratives are re-written. “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” As one of higher status, it would have been Zacchaeus's place to invite Jesus into his home but it is Jesus who claims the role of host here. But it isn't just that Jesus has come into his home. Jesus says, “Today salvation has come to this house because he, Zacchaeus too is a son of Abraham.” What has taken place in this story is the latest example of what it looks like for Jesus to seek out and save the lost.

But let's not lose sight of the grumbly haters of verse 7 who snidely say, “Jesus has gone to be the guest of that sinner.” This message of salvation is to them as much as it is to Zacchaeus. After all, for all of his flaws, he did make a fool of himself running ahead and climbing a tree like some kind of schoolboy. Why? Because he desperately wanted to see Jesus.

The crucial action in this story is the unexpected gospel moment which announces that the ones we might least expect are brought in to the fold and called children of God. “He

too is a son of Abraham,” Jesus says, which suggests to me is addressing the grumblers. All of you, Zacchaeus included, are my people.

Jesus knows they are caught in this broken system which rewards some and oppresses many. In the midst of that brokenness, before it is fixed, before we can verify that Zacchaeus has mended his ways or that his peers give him a chance, Jesus simply announces that salvation has come. That, my friends, is grace. The way Jesus offers is so utterly different than the way of the world, both then and now. It isn't about a vertical climb to the top at the expense of our neighbor. That is an image that characterizes the kingdoms of the world.

The image that perhaps best captures the life into which Jesus invites all of us is an expansive table where we are all guests, where we are all welcomed, where we all eat together. This is what the kingdom of God looks like and this is the central activity I imagine most of us will take part in later on this week.

For a couple of weeks now we've looked at stories where Jesus enters a home; Martha and Mary last week and Zacchaeus this week. A week from today we will gather on the 1st Sunday of Advent and begin a series with the theme *Close to Home*. The stories we will encounter throughout the Advent season are so rich with home imagery. For many of us, our homes become such sacred ground during this season. We decorate inside and out, celebrate traditions, but at the same time for many of us the idea of home pokes at grief we carry. Some of us may be away from home for the first time. We may be experiencing the first Christmas without a loved one. In the midst of whatever home means to us, we behold the mystery that Jesus, Emmanuel, makes his home among us.

So may this gospel announcement Jesus made in the home of a chief tax collector in Jericho prepare us for a week in which we humbly give thanks for God's blessings and prepare to make our lives a home for the coming Christ. May salvation and all that it evokes - wholeness, restoration, reconciliation, come to your house. May you be surprised at the radical welcome of Jesus and who he calls a child of God. And may you find peace in the reality that even in your striving to see Jesus, he is already seeking you and inviting you to take your place at his table. Amen.

### **Sources Used or Referenced**

Bass, Diana Butler. *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2018.

Silverstein, Shel. *The Giving Tree*. Harper and Row, 1964.

<https://lithub.com/somebody-finally-fixed-the-ending-of-the-giving-tree/>