

24th Sunday After Pentecost – Eric Nord

Isaiah 1:10-18; Psalm 32:1-7; 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12; Luke 19:1-10

Those of you who, like me, grew up in or around the church probably have some little musical ditty ringing in your ears—either something about a “wee little man,” or perhaps a memory from the ‘70s of the Medical Mission Sisters singing about how, “The Lord loved Zacchaeus better than them all.” Sometimes our very familiarity with a story keeps us from really understanding it. We think we understand it, so we stop really interrogating the story. I sometimes wish that I could really hear these stories as if I had never heard them before. I’ve had a bit of that experience reading Kenneth Bailey’s book, Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes; I’ve been able to hear these stories as if for the first time, because they have been interpreted for me in ways I would not have understood them. Bailey interprets these stories based on decades as a biblical scholar and seminary professor in the Middle East, learning the languages and customs of the region, some of which persist from the time of Christ.

If you haven’t read it, I commend it to you. (Those who recall the last time I stood here may wonder if I can preach without this book.)

Bailey stands my “Sunday School” understanding of this story on its head. The text tells us that Zacchaeus is the chief tax collector and is wealthy. Normally a wealthy person in this culture would be well regarded, and would have high social status. But being a tax collector, a collaborator with the occupiers, was a cause for hatred. Rabbinic teaching would have given Zacchaeus, the collaborator, the status of “unclean,” and contact with him would lead to defilement, so Zacchaeus actually has low social status.

Zacchaeus’ main problem in seeing Jesus through the crowd is this social status; a respected wealthy man would be accommodated by the crowd, but a hated collaborator would not. Bailey even suggests that for a short hated collaborator, the crowd could be a dangerous, perhaps even deadly place—in a crowd everyone could claim that no one saw what happened. The text implies that Zacchaeus’ short stature prevent him from seeing Jesus—Bailey helps us understand that Zacchaeus’ stature is short both physically and socially.

Bailey sees Zacchaeus’ response to the situation as quite radical. Running would be nearly unthinkable for an adult male of high social standing. (This is why the image of the Father in the parable of the prodigal son is so shocking—he runs to meet his disgraced son!). Bailey maintains that Zacchaeus must have been well away from the crowd, alone, and unobserved because he both ran and climbed. Climbing a tree would, like running, be socially unacceptable for an adult male, especially one of wealth, in that culture. (Apparently, at one point an American ambassador in Egypt climbed a tree in his yard to hang lights for a holiday party, and this was shocking news—the Egyptian president asked the ambassador if it was true, because it seemed impossible to him!).

So Zacchaeus, while the crowd is busy watching Jesus, sneaks ahead and runs well out of town. According to Bailey, sycamore-fig trees are noted for low, spreading branches and thick foliage. This, together with the audaciousness of climbing a tree, suggests that Zacchaeus was hoping to

avoid detection by the crowd. Maybe he was far enough from town that he estimated the crowd would have gone home?

The text does not detail how or when Zacchaeus is spotted in the tree—it just says that *when Jesus came to the place he looked up* and told Zacchaeus to *come down*. Bailey supposes that the leading edge of the crowd noticed him and were remarking/jeering at him. Zacchaeus is now in a very uncomfortable place. Not only can he not avoid the crowd, but he is at the center of their attention, in a ridiculous and precarious place. The crowd has this hated collaborator “treed,” and he has no way to escape with dignity. Even if he escapes without harm his reputation will certainly sink even lower than it already is. He may even be in physical danger. According to Bailey, Jesus steps up and invites himself to Zacchaeus’ house, and Zacchaeus hurries down and is happy to welcome him.

The text notes that *all who saw it began to grumble*. The crowd was probably disappointed Jesus was not staying in Jericho. They may have had a community leader ready to offer hospitality, since, according to Bailey, in that culture the community would choose the host. Now Jesus changes his mind and chooses his own host (breaking the tradition). Even worse, he chooses as his host the hated chief tax collector. This has not only political implications, it has religious implications. Zacchaeus is unclean, and his hospitality would defile those who accepted it. No wonder the crowd begins to grumble!

Another point here: Bailey sees Jesus interfering with the crowd and shifting their focus and anger and hostility from Zacchaeus to himself. Bailey sees the crowd as ready to humiliate Zacchaeus, or worse. Then Jesus intervenes and extricates Zacchaeus from their grasp.

Bailey points out that this story is paired with the healing of the blind beggar (Luke 18:35-43) as Jesus enters Jericho. Jesus takes the blind man seriously even when the crowd tried to silence him or keep him away from Jesus. In spite of the crowd’s attempted censure of his request, the crowd approves of Jesus’ intervention here, healing the poor marginalized man. (The text says *...all the people, when they saw it, praised God* – Luke 18:43).

Bailey notes that the crowd is much less approving when Jesus intervenes on behalf of Zacchaeus. They are happy when the oppressed are helped, but when the oppressor is helped, especially someone they see as their oppressor, the crowd is unhappy. But Jesus stands with Zacchaeus –to rescue and legitimate his person, not to legitimate his position. In fact, Jesus’ intervention here causes Zacchaeus to change his position.

Zacchaeus’ promise to give half of what he has to the poor and repay anyone he has wronged four-fold is, Bailey tells us, traditional exaggeration. In fact, if you do the math, if more than 1/8th of Zacchaeus’ wealth came from fraud or overcharging on taxes, then his literal implementation of this pledge would result in complete loss (leaving out any growth on investments or loss from spending any of his potentially ill-gotten gains). Bailey interprets it a traditional exaggeration that should be read as real commitment to make restitution that is not just symbolic. It means he is going to really do something, it signals his commitment to address the problem.

We need to understand that Zacchaeus' promise is a public promise. A dinner with an important personage would not be a private affair, as Bailey explains elsewhere. Other community members would be there. So Zacchaeus' repentance is public—and the seriousness implied by his exaggeration tells us he intends to take it seriously.

Jesus' response is, *Today Salvation has come to this house*. Bailey notes that rabbinic codes around restitution and repentance would have required that full restitution be made before repentance was considered to be accomplished. Jesus' word, *Salvation has come*, is spoken before that occurs. Jesus seems to imply that it is when we step out in faith that God's salvation reaches us? Affirming that he *is a son of Abraham* seems to reinforce this idea—that Zacchaeus, like Abraham, is on a journey of faithful obedience without knowing where it will lead.

We could also understand Jesus' words here as referring to himself and his interaction with Zacchaeus. Jesus saves Zacchaeus from the crowd. Jesus himself comes to Zacchaeus' house, so saying, *today Salvation has come to this house*, could mean many things.

Let's turn for a moment to the epistle reading for today (2 Thess. 1:1-4, 11-12). Paul says that he thanks God for the Thessalonian church, *Because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing* (v. 3) and concludes *...we always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith* (v. 11) *... so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you* (v. 12a).

Paul is describing the fruit of repentance much like what Zacchaeus shows. Paul recognizes the weakness of our *good resolve*, and prays for divine power to work those resolves out. I think we can see this happening in our Gospel text. We can understand Zacchaeus' desire to see Jesus as an outcome of the work of the Spirit—it is a strong enough desire to propel him to do things that were far outside the expected or even acceptable actions for him—strong enough for him to engage in strange behavior. His good resolve to make restitution by using his wealth to benefit others is a work of faith, and its fulfillment will require God's power, as Paul prays for the Thessalonian church.

The Old Testament reading (Isaiah 1:10-18) also sheds some light on this. John Sawyer (Isaiah, Vol. 1, Westminster Press) summarizes the last third of the reading thus: "Forgiveness is possible, but it requires moral courage and obedience rather than ritual," and the test of obedience for the prophets is not "keeping the laws" but to "*seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow*". (Sawyer). Zacchaeus' response to Jesus is this kind of obedience.

I want to return to Jesus' inviting himself to Zacchaeus' "unclean" house. We already noted that Zacchaeus' hospitality would defile those who accepted it. Jesus pulls a fast one here—by inviting himself to Zacchaeus' house he forces the respected community leaders who wanted to talk to him (and probably wanted to be seen with him) to choose between following their rules and being with Jesus. They could not attend the meal unless they were willing to become defiled. Over and over in the gospels Jesus shows an amazing ability to put people in positions where

their choices clarify what is important to them. Think about the rich young ruler. Think about his healing on the Sabbath in front of the Pharisees.

Speaking of the story of the rich young ruler, this precedes the healing of the blind man in Luke 18. Recall that when Jesus tells him '*...it is easier for a camel to through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.*' Those who heard it said, '*Then who can be saved?*' He replied, '*What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.*'

Here, just a few paragraphs further along, we see another rich man, who hadn't even followed all the rules, showing that he is willing to give away what he has, to make restitution, to make following and obeying Jesus more important than the well-being, comfort, and safety of his family.

The line running through all of these texts is that repentance is a journey that depends on the Spirit of God. It is through the Spirit that we are moved to repentance. It is by the power of God that our good resolves are worked out. This does not remove the burden from us—we must be obedient, but that occurs because we can trust in God's salvation and provision. What ridiculous things is Jesus calling us to today? What choices does he offer us that help us clarify what is important to us?