

“The Unexpected Gospel”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for November 3rd 2019 (21st Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Luke 19: 1-10

It is likely for the best...

...likely for the best...

...that Luke makes explicit the fact that Zacchaeus was *small in stature* and chose to climb that sycamore tree so that, despite his height, he was able to see the Lord Jesus as he and his travelling companions passed through the city of Jericho on their way to Jerusalem. Likely for the best that Luke insists that it was Zacchaeus’ height which drove him up that tree since, minus that explicit assurance, an inquiring and somewhat mischievous mind such as “yours-truly” might well conclude that Zacchaeus was up that tree because he had been chased up that tree. And to be fair...to be fair...that alternative explanation is more than a wee bit plausible!

After all! Tax collectors have never been especially popular. They were especially unpopular, however, in Zacchaeus’ world, in part because the collection of taxes was on behalf of unpopular governments: not only the despised Roman Imperial masters, but also the local structure under the authority of the Herods and their minions. Furthermore, tax-collectors—back in that day—worked on a basis that appears to have been one-part commission, and one-part extortion, with their own-income derived from whatever they were able to collect on top of the amount they needed to remit to the government. It’s not a formula likely to have helped Zacchaeus win friends and influence people. All the same, he appears to have been quite adept at his craft: described by Luke as one of the “chief” tax collectors and—less we miss the point—also described by Luke as having been quite wealthy. And so, to repeat myself: it’s probably for the best that Luke spells out the motive that took Zacchaeus up that tree since the alternative explanation—that he was chased up that tree by vengeful neighbors—might otherwise have gained currency. Then again.

* * * * *

Zacchaeus was, perhaps, fortunate in having lived long before the advent of “social-media”: by which I mean the internet and the brave new world of on-line communication made possible by the internet and the creation of such online providers as Facebook and Twitter. For that matter, he was likely fortunate to have not been in the proximity of any number of modern-day college campuses, on which things might not have ended nearly so well for Zacchaeus.

I am referring here to a phenomenon that has come to be known by such terms as “call-out culture”, “outrage culture” or—perhaps most ominously—“cancel culture”.

Wikipedia defines this phenomenon as “a form of public shaming—ponder that phrase, **public shaming**—public shaming that aims to hold individuals and groups accountable for their actions by calling attention to behavior that is perceived to be problematic.” At its most radical extreme—in other words at its “**cancel** culture” extreme—“outrage culture” takes the form of a boycott, “in which someone (usually a celebrity) who has shared a questionable or unpopular opinion, or has had behavior that is perceived to be either offensive or problematic called out on social media, is “cancelled”: completely boycotted by many of their followers or supporters, often leading to massive declines in [their] careers and fanbase.”

And yes...likely because I have been thinking about Zacchaeus and how he would have fared as an “out-of-the-closet tax-collector/collaborator with the ruling-class” sort of guy were he to rear his head on Facebook or Twitter...I took due note, earlier this week, when former President Barack Obama spoke to a group of University students and expressed grave concerns about the excesses he sees in the “outrage culture” (which might also be described as “mob” or “vigilante” culture), a culture that has so vigorously come to life the past few years. The former President said to his audience:

“One danger I see among young people particularly on college campuses: I do get a sense sometimes now among certain young people — and this is accelerated by social media — there is this sense sometimes, the way of me making change, is to be as judgmental as possible about other people and that’s enough.

“Like if I tweet or hashtag about how you didn’t do something right, or use the wrong verb, then I can sit back and feel pretty good about myself. ‘Cuz man, did you see how woke I was? I called you out!”

“This idea of purity, and you’re never compromised, and you’re politically woke, and all that stuff — you should get over that quickly,” Obama told the audience. “The world is messy. There are ambiguities. People who do really good stuff have flaws.”

To which I hasten add: also worth noting that just as people who do really good stuff have flaws, there are many people who do some really questionable stuff who have virtues or—even if they are devoid of all virtue—are still human beings. Even tax-collectors. Even tax-collectors who use questionable means as they go about their business. Even chief tax-collectors who manage to get quite wealthy in the process. Perhaps they do, at the end of the day, need to be called out for their questionable stuff; surely what they do not need, at the end of the day, is simply to be cancelled.

* * * * *

I wonder. I wonder how I might have felt, had I been—say—the chief Rabbi in suburban Jericho, had I found out (just as I was shutting down the Synagogue for the day and getting ready to head home for dinner)...

...I wonder how I would have felt had I learned that the distinguished Rabbi from Galilee had arrived in Jericho and had chosen to dine with Zacchaeus! I imagine I might, under that set of circumstances, have been one of the grumblers in the town-square who, when others inquired as to Jesus' whereabouts, answered (with considerable snark): "Oh, Jesus? Jesus of Galilee? Well: he has gone in—**has chosen to go in!**—to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." You see: there is nothing new about "outrage culture", "call-out culture", "cancel culture" or to put it most sharply: there is nothing new about the power of the mob. Social media may well amplify its power and its range, but "outrage culture" is at least as old as the outrage Cain expressed toward God and—given that he did not possess the power to strike back at God directly—chose to manifest his outrage by murdering his hapless brother, Abel. Trust me: outrage is hardly a new phenomenon!

What is, however, new—new every morning—is the way in which Christ cuts through the outrage, by embracing Zacchaeus and permitting this tax-collecting out-cast (as much outlaw as outcast) to serve as his host. And yes: I realize...I realize full well that Zacchaeus—when he learns of the grumbling—responds with a gesture best understood as an act of radical repentance: offering to make right whatever he can make right in response to the radical acceptance offered him by Jesus. But let's not lose sight, please...let's not lose sight of the order in which those two things happen: because nowhere are we left with the impression that Zacchaeus' repentance is what prompts Christ's generosity or that Christ's generosity is conditional upon Zacchaeus' repentance. No. It is the other-way around. Full acceptance first. Full, unconditional acceptance, first. And only then...only then...Zacchaeus' genuine attempt at response.

And, of course, that's why we call it Gospel. That's why we call it "good news". And yes: why that Gospel, even in the midst of those who think they know it best, can always find themselves taken by surprise when it lands in their midst. The Gospel. The **unexpected** Gospel....good news...good news of God's unexpected, but always welcome, word of acceptance, word of grace.

* * * * *

A final thought.

On October 31st 1517, Martin Luther sent a letter to the Archbishop of Mainz: a letter containing his 95 Theses condemning the use of Indulgences as a means of raising funds for the Church. By all accounts, Luther did not realize that he was thereby launching the Reformation; he assumed that his concerns would be heard in good faith by those who read his letter and that reform would take place in the Church. As we all know, that is not how things worked out.

And I found myself, Friday afternoon, taking the time to re-read five sermons I preached two years ago, on what was the 500th anniversary of the start to the Reformation: sermons that took as their theme the five great "solas" by which the Reformation Churches came to define themselves over the centuries. *Sola fide*: by faith

alone. *Sola scriptura*: by scripture alone. *Solus Christus*: by Christ alone. *Soli Deo gloria*: to the glory of God alone. And last—last but most certainly not least—*sola gratia*: by grace alone. Reading those sermons (and this is true anytime I re-read one of my sermons after the passage of a few months or years) re-reading them left me occasionally scratching my head, wondering why in the world that guy didn't manage to put things more succinctly! But reading those sermons also (perhaps especially in light of our friend Zacchaeus) **also** renewed in me the conviction that “God help us, if we ever abandon our willingness to stand on the ground of *sola gratia*: by grace alone.”

I hasten to add that the Reformation Churches—the Protestant mainline Churches—are not the only churches to emphasize grace; sometimes—especially at our more moralistic moments we appear to forget all about grace, which is something we have in common with all churches of every shape and stripe. Nor do I want to pretend that things in the Protestant mainline Churches in Europe and North America are going swimmingly right about now; are we mainline, sideline, or end-of-the-line churches? Your guess is as good as mine.

But frankly, even were I to know that the ship we are on is eventually going to sink, I would hope that the word of grace—the news of the unexpected Gospel—would be on our lips as we went down for the count. Because frankly: when I look at contemporary culture—when I look at the unforgiving nature of the mob that can so easily be unleashed through our sophisticated social-media outlets—what I see is a culture that has no need for our morals, but has great need to recall that forgiveness is not a dirty word, that renewal is not an impossible-possibility for even the worst of sinners, and that the same Christ who chose to frequent all the wrong establishments and chose to embrace all the wrong characters is alive, still frequenting all of the wrong places and championing all the wrong people. Inviting them home. And yes, in his goodness and in his glory....inviting **us** home.

And glory be to God, whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to God from generation to generation: in the Church and in Christ Jesus now and forever more. Thanks be to God.