

A sermon preached in the Unraveled series  
Radically unraveling vocation: Zacchaeus, the wealthy tax collector  
Luke 19:1-10  
By Rev. Peter J. Blank  
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Today's sermon is week four in our fall series called Unraveled, all about how God takes the stuff of our lives that we think we are holding together so well and unravels it; sometimes even unravels US! And today we are talking about the radical unraveling of vocation. We are taking a look at a much more well known story than last week of Zacchaeus. He is a man who has built a rich life for himself where he profits from a system that robs the majority in order to benefit those at the very top. He is not like Rizpah from last week; this poor, abused and disenfranchised woman. He is more properly compared to Bernie Madoff, or if you don't recognize him, then the Grinch, or if that makes no sense, then Danny DiVito in any movie role he played in - especially Matilda.

Our retelling of the stories in the Bible is a big part of who we are as Church. We are a people of this story. God's story. That thread deep in our collective memory of who we are as God's beloved.

Today God's story is retold through the interaction between Jesus and Zacchaeus. This is a story that is—for at least some people here—familiar. Yet it is *always* good to repeat the story. This is how we learn. This is how we teach our children. Repetition. Over and over. Our retellings of these biblical stories are our living, the breathing chronicles of who we are as people of God. As human beings.

So, I want to retell the story. Here and now. Zacchaeus' story. How many of you, as the bible passage was read today, had a song pop into your head? A song that starts out, "Zacchaeus was a wee little man..."? How many of you could sing that song today?

Can you sing it...?

*Zacchaeus was a wee little man  
And a wee little man was he  
He climbed up in a sycamore tree  
For the Lord he wanted to see*

*And when the Savior passed that way  
He looked up in the tree  
And said, 'Zacchaeus, you come down!  
For I'm going to your house today!  
For I'm going to your house today!*

And... how many of you have never heard that song before?

These songs, the ones we all know, hold us together. They connect us. This is our time. Our culture. A moment when our intertwining life experiences come from a multitude of backgrounds. We have fewer collective songs and stories in this time of digital media and global information.

Whether you know the tune or not, we *do know*... and can agree...that this is a story that is really easy to understand... right??? In the song, we have this easy to grasp, catchy tune that summaries Zacchaeus' urge to see Jesus:

Zacchaeus climbs up a tree.

Jesus walks by.

Jesus sees Zacchaeus.

Jesus tells Zacchaeus that he's coming over to his house.

The end.

That's it. A simple, straight forward tale. End of story, right? Zacchaeus is saved. Life is good.

But wait. Let's reread the story.

This is a retelling found only the gospel of Luke. In its original context, and for us today, there is something else lurking beneath the surface. In this short, single encounter, there is a much, much bigger story.

This is narrative packed with oppression. Thievery. Quid pro quo. Working the system to get ahead. Working the system for your own benefit. To become rich. To heck with everyone else. There is anger. There is unsettling, and complaining, all around.

Yet this is also an encounter with the Golden Rule. Did you hear it?

This is an event that unraveled everyone that was out on the streets of Jericho that day. Jesus flipped their world upside down, and Zacchaeus responded by breaking every rule in the book of "this is the way things are supposed to be." The crowds grumbled. This was wrong. Zacchaeus was NOT the person Jesus should see. Zacchaeus was NOT the person Jesus should reach out to. And Zacchaeus was definitely NOT the person Jesus should be hanging out with. No. Nada. Not.

This story reminds me of the choice that is voiced in the movie, "The Matrix". Where Neo is given the choice to take the blue pill and life will go on as it always had, or the red pill where the world will be flipped upside down, then Neo will learn about the Matrix.

Diana Butler Bass writes, "Since Zacchaeus was a Jew and not a Roman citizen, there was only one way he could become wealthy. In the lands they conquered, the Romans offered some political positions at auction to local inhabitants... That is how Zacchaeus got rich... he had bought his position... and worked up from there to become chief tax collector in the important city of Jericho." (Bass, Diana Butler. *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks* p. 157) She goes on to note that, "This is not a charming children's story. This is a story about the guy who cuts in line, cheats on tests, and stuffs the ballot box in order to become class president." (Bass, p. 158)

The passage in Luke begins by telling us that Jesus was just passing through. Jesus was just passing through Jericho that dusty day—and the whole world was transformed in a single encounter. Bass suggests that this tale is a lived example of Jesus' teaching earlier in Luke, "*Do to others as you would have them do to you*" (Luke 6:31), what we call the Golden Rule. She says that, "The Golden Rule is a concise summary of Jesus's encounter with Zacchaeus. 'Come down from that tree,' Jesus insisted, 'and sit together where all people are hosts and guests, givers and receivers together.'" (Bass, p. 168)

A vocation unraveled, a world turned upside down. A way of extortions, and lies, and working the system undone. A life expectation radically re-understood in an instant. Zacchaeus, according to Bass, "knew gratitude was public, communal, and political. Jesus jogged his spiritual memory, and made Zacchaeus' deep spiritual longings obvious. Jesus made him choose. Zacchaeus had to resist the political assumptions of the around him in favor of a different vision of the world." (Bass, p. 164)

So come. Let us sit together. Let us unravel the busyness and upheaval we have been taught to accept. Come together. Let us weave a new story...

Perhaps it's at the communion table where we find inspiration to see another and celebrate the feast which Christ has prepared.

Perhaps it's at table where we are reminded that Christ has made room for everyone because all are included in God's family, especially anyone like Zacchaeus. The words of 'Welcome', 'Bienvenidos', 'All Y'all come' make us

welcome at this table.

Perhaps it's at table where our expectations, judgments, grumblings and many other flaws unravel into love, mercy and generosity.

Perhaps it's at table where we see Christ and realize that we are also found.



People of God, let us come together. Let us weave a new story...

One "where all people are hosts and guests, givers and receivers together."

Come. Tell *that* story...