

If You Turn Things Upside Down
Luke 19:1-10
Second Baptist Church, Memphis
November 4, 2007
Dr. Brent Beasley

The story of Zaccaheus reminds us that rogues and rascals are perched on the branches of Christianity's family tree.

[Thanks to Paul Duke for this phrase in "A Festive Repentance," The Christian Century, October 18, 1995]

In his book *A Coming Christ in Advent*, New Testament scholar Raymond Brown writes about the interesting characters in Jesus' family tree and how God's purposes are sustained and even advanced by our own particular failures.

The God who wrote the beginnings of Christ with crooked lines also writes the sequence of Christ with crooked lines, and some of those lines are our own lives and witness. A God who did not hesitate to use the scheming as well as the noble, the impure as well as the pure, men to whom the world harkened and women upon whom the world frowned – this God continues to work through the same mélange.

Zacchaeus is one of those scheming, impure ones, one upon whom his world frowned.

Now we've come to think of Zacchaeus as kind of cute. We smile when we tell about him. He even has his own children's song: *Zacchaeus was a wee little man*. A cute little man who climbed up in a tree like a child.

Zacchaeus was not cute.

I was reading about a convicted sex offender who was released from prison last summer. He tried to move into a suburban Los Angeles neighborhood where his presence was made known to the residents. A CNN reporter spoke with some of those residents who were demonstrating against the man living in their neighborhood. They made it clear: they wanted him gone. Can you blame them?

Where will he go? the reporter asked one fellow.

He can burn in hell for all I care! the man replied.

Imagine somehow that Jesus Christ showed up at the demonstration and called out to the sex offender, who remained behind closed the closed doors and drawn shades of his home, *Come with me sir. Let us have dinner together tonight.*

Maybe that offers a hint as to how people felt about Zacchaeus. Turn the clock back to his time and the statement about burning in hell could very well have been made about him. He was a tax collector. You know about tax collectors in Jesus' time. They were the most unpopular people, the biggest outcasts you could find—except maybe the lepers.

And as a "chief" tax collector, he had reached the top of his hated profession. His wealth was built on the backs of his oppressed fellow Jews. He was a turn coat. Remember the Jewish people were ruled by the Romans, which they deeply resented.

Roman officials would contract with local entrepreneurs to collect the taxes, customs and fees in a certain area. So here was a Jew who cooperated with Roman authorities to extract

taxes from his countrymen—plus whatever he could squeeze out for himself.

These chief tax collectors had to pay their contract in advance. So the Romans actually got their money from the chief tax collector. Then, he would hire people to go out and collect the taxes from the people, hoping that when it was all collected he'd have a profit. The harder he leaned on his underlings, the richer he grew.

Needless to say, it was a system open to abuse. The more a tax collector could collect, the bigger his profit. So the tax collector was seen as a cheater and a traitor, because he worked for the Romans and because the system itself encouraged cheating.

Zacchaeus, chief tax-collector, heard Jesus was going to be passing through Jericho, so he climbed up in a sycamore tree so he could see something more than just the backs of people's heads.

I guess they lined up along that dusty road like it was some kind of parade. No clowns. No Shriners on their little scooters. No floats with people waving. No marching bands.

Just an average looking guy named Jesus walking along with some rough looking characters: a couple of fisherman and a few others. Some people thought he was the Messiah. A bunch of them were hoping to get healed. Some were just curious.

I don't know why Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus so badly. But the richest man in town— he climbs up in a tree like a kid.

When Jesus got about to where Zacchaeus was, he went over to him, and he stopped.

He said, *Zacchaeus, come on down. I'm coming over to your house.*

And pretty soon everybody was talking about it.

Not only was Jesus socializing with a tax collector, but he was going to eat with him. Now, for us, that may not seem like too big of a deal. But for the Jews—it was a very big deal.

You didn't eat with just anybody. To eat with someone meant you were forming some sort of a bond with the person. You didn't just share a meal in someone's home lightly if you were a Jew. This whole thing of whom you ate with and what you ate was a big deal.

Knowing all that, Jesus walked up to Zacchaeus, holding on for dear life up in that tree, and he said, *Come on down. I'm coming over for dinner.*

And all Jericho snickered and whispered. To think that Jesus would invite himself to the house of a man that nobody else would touch with a ten-foot-pole.

But Jesus knew what he was doing. Zacchaeus was so completely stunned and excited by the honor of the whole thing that before he had a chance to change his mind, he promised turn over fifty percent of his holdings to the poor.

And not only that, but to pay back, four to one, all the cash he'd ever extorted from everybody else. And Jesus was just delighted. *Today, salvation has come to this house*, he said.

And since salvation was his specialty after all, you'd assume he was right.

[Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who*]

Maya Angelou is a wonderful poet and writer. When she was in her mid-twenties, though, she had kind of lost herself, was asking questions about who she was, her identity.

(*Wouldn't Take Nothing for my Journey Now*, Maya Angelou, pp 75-76.)

Listen to how she describes what happened:

In my twenties in San Francisco, I became a sophisticate and an acting agnostic. It wasn't that I stopped believing in God, it's just that God didn't seem to be around the neighborhoods I frequented.

*One day, my voice teacher asked me to read a passage from a book. I was twenty-four, very erudite, very worldly. He asked me to read from *Lessons in Truth*, a section which ended with these words, "God loves me."*

I read it and closed the book and my teacher said, "Read it again."

I pointedly opened the book and sarcastically read, "God loves me."

He said, "Read it again." After about the seventh repetition, I began to sense that there might be truth in this statement, that there was a possibility that God really did love me. Me. Maya Angelou. I suddenly began to cry at the grandness of it all.

I knew that if God loved me, then I could do wonderful things. I could try great things. Learn anything. Achieve anything. For what could stand against me and God?

That knowledge humbles me. That knowledge humbles me, melts my bones, closes my ears and makes my teeth rock loosely in their gums. And it also liberates me. I am a big bird, winging over high mountains and down into serene valleys. I am ripples of waves on silver seas. I am a spring leaf trembling in anticipation.

A spring leaf trembling in anticipation on God's family tree. The tree that Jesus wants to use to shape and reshape our identity, no matter what other family we come from, great or small. Significant or insignificant. No matter what we come from, no matter whether we've been powerful or whether we have been victims, Come, he says, into my family and allow me to reshape who you are as a child of the living God.

The truth is that an encounter with Jesus really can turn a person's life upside down. Do you believe that?

When the light of Christ spilled into his life, Zacchaeus was exposed in all his littleness. Perhaps for the very first time, Zacchaeus saw himself as he really was: greedy, self-centered, a traitor, a cheat, a con man. Zacchaeus didn't like what he saw. He was ashamed.

But somehow he felt that Jesus could turn his life upside down. And Jesus did. To use an image that Howard Thurman offered, this word of Jesus sets a crown over Zacchaeus that he will spend the rest of his life gladly growing tall enough to wear.

You have probably heard the saying, *Jesus loves you just the way you are—but way too much to let you stay that way.*

At the beginning of Zacchaeus' day he saw Jesus at a distance. From a tree.

He was, in the eyes of the people of Jericho, a sinner—unacceptable, a hated person. There is no doubt he felt the pain of isolation and loneliness, for he wanted to see the Jesus who was passing through town—the Jesus who reached out to people other religious leaders wouldn't bother with.

At the end of the day the view is up close and personal. A greedy, rich tax collector is about to open up his bank account to give to the poor and make restitution to those he had defrauded. Wholeness (salvation) brings healing to the household of Zacchaeus.

This is the new Zacchaeus.
How did it happen? What did Jesus say to him? What did he say to Jesus?

Lloyd C. Douglas in his classic, *"The Mirror"* from the American Pulpit series imagines this exchange between Jesus and Zacchaeus.

Zacchaeus, said the carpenter gently, *What did you see that made you desire this peace?*

Good master -- I saw mirrored in your eyes -- the face of the Zacchaeus I was meant to be.

The love of God does not change us from who we are into some other-better person, but calls forth from within our souls the essence of the person we were created to be.
[John Jewell, *Lectionary Sermons*, November 1, 1998]

At the end of this story Jesus says that he has come to seek and to save the lost.

To be lost is to be dissociated from the person God made us to be, separated, alienated from the person God made us to be. And salvation is to discover who we are and who we can become through the love of Christ. We do not have to make ourselves into anything. The love and the power of God will create us and make us whole.

If you are possessed by something that is tearing you apart, something that you are ashamed of, if you want to change and to be changed, the love of God really can change everything.

You can recover from past mistakes.
You can hope for your life to change.

This is the truth. If you turn things upside down.

This sermon was to conclude with a video clip illustrating this truth.