

What about the Wee Little Man?
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Luke 19:1-10 (NRSVue)

1 He entered Jericho and was passing through it. 2 A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. 3 He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. 4 So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. 5 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**." 6 So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. 7 All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." 8 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." 9 Then Jesus said to him, "**Today** salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham. 10 For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

*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 and said, "Zacchaeus, You Come Down...
for I'm going to your house today! For I'm going to your house today!*

The story "and life" of Zacchaeus is told to us in a mere ten verses. From those ten verses we assume many things about Zacchaeus and Jesus. We know a few things and from that we extract so much. Basically, the story of Zacchaeus is this –

- Zacchaeus
 - A chief tax collector
 - Rich
 - Wants to see Jesus, this famous, Jewish teacher
 - Can't see because he's short
 - Climbs a tree to see
- Jesus sees Zacchaeus, tells him to hurry up & get out of the tree because Jesus is going to stay at his house
- Zacchaeus receives Jesus, rejoicing
- The crowd witnessed this and is upset because Jesus chooses to stay at the home of a sinner
- Zacchaeus says to Jesus,
 - I give half of my possessions to the poor
 - If I defraud anyone, I return to them fourfold
- Jesus says, TODAY, salvation has come to this house because he is a son of Abraham, for the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost.

So. From this story of a wee little man's encounter with Jesus, what do we learn? For those of you older than _____, other than the song, what lessons do you remember from Sunday School?

More likely than not, from this story you've be taught about the greatness of Jesus' kindness and salvation; by simply calling to Zacchaeus, Jesus leads the despised sinner Zacchaeus to repentance so that he's motivated to give away half of wealth and pay back. For Zacchaeus' repentance he's promised a place in the kingdom.

Sound familiar?

So, what do you think about this interpretation and understanding of the story? Does it speak to you in this way? Where do you place yourself in the story?

With the basic information we have from these ten verses, a rudimentary interpretation of "Jesus can save even the worst of sinners simply with his kindness," is fine. It provides hope, reassurance and motivation, but there are many, many details that lie within the context of this story that can teach us so much more.

Zacchaeus was a Jew and not a Roman citizen, there was only one way he could become wealthy. In lands that they conquered; the Romans offered some political positions at auction to local inhabitants. The tax collectors were the main agents of the patronage system. It was a good job. While governors ensured that peace and prosperity flowed down from the emperor, tax collectors made sure that the cash came up from the provinces to pay the military and enrich the noble classes in the imperial city. tax collectors guaranteed that the empire worked and that its benefits reached those at the top.

- A tax collector was allowed to take a "cut" off the top of the profits as the money headed to Rome.

Zacchaeus was not just a tax collector, but a chief tax collector. While he might have been "wee" in physical stature, he was a big man; CHIEF tax collector of Jericho - that helped him to become a very rich man. He got his position by collaborating with Roman authority – in effect he was seen as a traitor to his own people.

- People saw him as the kind of guy that cuts in line, cheats on tests, and stuffs the ballot box in order to become class president. Not only did he climb trees, but he was smart enough to climb up the Roman political system – he knew how to play the game....and more.
- His neighbors hated him.
 - Those beneath his status hated him because of what he did.
 - Those above his status, who worried he might be taking more than your "fair share" off the top, distrusted him.
 - By choosing to be wealthy, he chose a life of solitude and scorn.
 - imagine what it must have been like to be Zacchaeus? Sacrificing friendships, community and family for money and status – just to be alone and despised by your own people. It's not like the Romans wanted relationship with him...or would support him, comfort him or think twice about him. To the Romans he was a cog in a machine...and nothing more.
- Knowing these things, why might Zacchaeus have been so eager to climb that tree and get a look at Jesus? A couple of reasons possibly...
 - This fellow Jew, Jesus, was healing people and stirring up crowds. If he was, in fact, the promised Messiah, that was bad for the Roman Empire and bad for business. Jesus might inspire insurrection and a revolt, encouraging people to NOT pay their taxes. Zacchaeus' livelihood was potentially in danger.
 - But remember – Zacchaeus was a smart man and a Jew. It's quite possible that Zacchaeus was pious and devout. Just because he was rich, was he necessarily a sinner? He chose a job that was not liked among the Jews, but it was a job and if he didn't do it, someone else would, do,

why not? As a chief tax collector, he could have been equally excited by the prospects of this maverick teacher. As a smart man, it's quite possible that he was financially stable and Jesus' presence and preaching proved no danger to him or his livelihood.

- Jesus comes along and does exactly what he usually does – he turns everything upside down on its head. **Jesus reveals a conflict between the Roman system of gratitude and an alternative vision of Thanksgiving.**
 - He sees Zacchaeus. Of all the people there, why did he single out Zacchaeus? Because he was up in a tree? What did Jesus see in Zacchaeus? A righteous hearted Jew mixed up in the Roman system or did Jesus recognize a collaborator and agent of the Roman overloads? Either way, he said, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down. For I must stay at your house today.”
 - Jesus called him down, ordered him to stand as equals with him on the ground, and then invited himself to dinner.
 - What would you do if someone did that to you?
 - A person of lower class (Jesus) with less power than you, orders you (Zacchaeus) to go to him and then **tells** you that you're going to feed him and house him for the night.
 - Jesus had guts.
 - Zacchaeus responded immediately – getting out of the tree and welcoming Jesus. Depending upon the translation we read, Zacchaeus' emotion ranged from happy to overjoy!
 - Wait...what? If Zacchaeus is a sinful, traitorous, tax collector who might lose everything because of Jesus – why would he be happy about it?
 - What did others think?
 - Jesus wants to spend time with him!!!! That traitor! That scoundrel! That sacrilegious.
 - When Jesus wants to hang out with the dregs of society – prostitutes, adulterers and tax collectors, who was usually bothered by this? The pharisees, chief priests and elders! They're the ones who have a problem with Jesus “sullying” the rules and authority of the Jewish faith – nothing the everyday folks. Not the hard-working people, the widows, orphans and poor.
 - We see this throughout the gospels (Matt 21:31, John 8:1-11, Mark 2:13-17)
 - BUT – in this story, it is the crowd of everyday Jews, non-Romans, those with no power or wealth in the Roman Systems. They are the ones who have a problem with Jesus' unconditional love and welcome for ALL sinners.
 - Do we / Can we --- see ourselves in that position? In our own time and lives, how quick are we to judge others as unworthy of receiving grace and mercy? Do we play into the “SYSTEM” of putting people in their place ... ideally, if it's lower than us? If Jesus were to return today, he certainly would rather spend time with me than a sex worker? Or a prisoner?
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- So back to Jesus turning things upside down – what exactly did he upend besides loving a despised tax collector?
 - The whole structure of Roman society was based in a quid pro quo system of elites doing favors for those beneath them to secure political loyalty.
 - In normal circumstances, someone of Zacchaeus' status should have invited Jesus to his home. Once Jesus accepted Zacchaeus's hospitality, then Jesus would owe Zacchaeus his gratitude, an obligation to repay the favor that had been extended to him. That, however, would have undermined Jesus's spiritual authority with the crowds who followed him. They would have

wanted Jesus to reject such an overture. The crowd doesn't want Jesus to stay with Zacchaeus regardless of who invited who. ---- But Jesus undermined this whole gratitude business by inviting **himself** to Zacchaeus's house. Jesus offered the gift of his presence to one who supposedly did not deserve it. This made Zacchaeus not a benefactor, but a beneficiary of a gift. Technically, Zacchaeus now owed Jesus something.

- Besides demonstrating love and mercy for "a sinner," Jesus completely disregards the Roman System of quid pro quo. It's both subtle and overt – a perfect way for Jesus to lovingly and peacefully "stick it to the man."
- The text indicates that after Jesus' "invitation," Zacchaeus commits to giving away...
 - Half of his wealth to the poor
 - Repay all he defrauded + 4x
 - Reading this we get the feeling that Zaachaeus basically bankrupts himself, thusly resigning his position
 - BUT...
 - If we return to the original Greek, we discover that the tense isn't future, but present. In the Greek, Zacchaeus doesn't say, "I WILL GIVE," but rather he says to Jesus, "I DO GIVE."
 - How does that change things?
 - If Zacchaeus DOES already give half of his wealth (50% v 10%) to the poor and he already repays 4x (vs. 2x)...
 - It affirms the fact that Zacchaeus IS a financially smart person – not just a greedy, money-hungry, jer.
 - what is Jesus doing in this story? Is he motivating a sinner or affirming a righteous man?

So.... what of the Wee Little Man story speaks to you? Anything new? Do you relate to Zacchaeus ... the crowd ...or maybe both? Here are some takeaways...

- We may live in a world that is full of patriarchal and hierarchical systems, but we can actively and creatively control and/or reject how we participate in it. Jesus demonstrated and taught that we can live loving, fulfilling, and righteous lives; exchanging a world of tit-for-tat obligations based on debt and oppression and instead live in hospitality, mutuality, and relationship.
- As part of the crowd, we must stop judging others. We absolutely must. We know that our own lives are very complex, so why would anyone else's be any less complicated? Or be reason to be excluded by God? We will never know all that God knows of our fellow siblings – of what they do and why they do it. Judging is God's business – our role in it is to welcome and invite with love.

Jesus invited the least likely and the least desirable to the table. He ate with the "wrong people;" those who were hated for any numbers of reasons, all of which had nothing (and still have nothing) to do with being a child of Abraham, with being a child of God. I want to be invited to the Lord's table, so I will always endeavor to extend an invitation myself.

May we all do so.¹

AMEN

¹ Excerpts and ideas from *Grateful*, by Diana Butler Bass