

In today's reading Jesus is still on his way to Jerusalem, still telling his disciples to expect opposition, humiliation, and his death, and his disciples are still not understanding. But on his way, not yet the crucified and risen Christ, he is also still encountering people in need, and changing their lives. The form of Christianity that survived and became known as orthodoxy is predicated on the death and resurrection of Jesus as a lens through which to understand everything, and justly so. But stories like this, where Jesus is just on the verge of his Passion and yet he's still transforming lives as the rabbi from Nazareth, make me wonder if we undervalue the rabbi. The blind man near Jericho didn't know the crucified and risen Christ, but he regained his sight and followed Jesus. Zacchaeus didn't follow Jesus to the cross, but his life was changed. In a sense, Jesus was modeling and sharing resurrection before he ever got to the cross.

The gospel writer Luke is very concerned about the poor and the marginalized, perhaps more than Mark or Matthew, but in the story of Zacchaeus he gives us a character about whom the main thing we know is that he's rich. Luke even invents a word for him, the word translated as "chief tax collector," which apparently doesn't exist in Greek and had to be kind of made up, like one of those German omnibus words with twenty syllables. It wasn't enough to tell us that Zacchaeus was a tax collector, which apparently was already bad; he has to be a "chief tax collector," sort of a super-duper sharky thief and turncoat. Barbara Lundblad surmises that Zacchaeus might not like his job and what it does to his standing in the community, but he figures he's providing for his family and if he doesn't do it someone else will. I'm sure it wasn't a job that gave a normal person a

lot of joy. You're essentially making your living extorting people to pay a government they already hate, in which they have no stake. And clearly Zacchaeus was not beloved by his community; he'd be the guy you love to hate.

At any rate, Zacchaeus is sufficiently uninterested in his job that he takes some time off to try to see this traveling rabbi that people have been talking about. He wants to "see who Jesus is," Luke says, but can't get through the crowd because he's too short. A bit of trivia: it's possible that "short in stature" means "diminished in reputation." That is, he's not physically little but people *think* little of him, so they don't let him through. Small towns are not necessarily warm fuzzy places for everybody; it could be difficult to be chief tax collector in a place like Jericho. Zacchaeus gets to a place where he can see Jesus but Jesus is unlikely to see him—up in a tree. And yet, when Jesus comes to that place, he tips his head up and says, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today."

Naturally all the good and righteous people disapproved, saying, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Because it's important to keep score. But Zacchaeus' next words are good and righteous too: "Half of my possessions I give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone, I pay back four times as much." Whether he is making a statement of intention or explaining that this is his current practice, we can't tell, but Jesus turns him from an outsider to an insider in one fell swoop, saying, "Today salvation has come to this house, *because he too is a son of Abraham.*"

Jesus says that he came to seek out and to save the lost, and in Zacchaeus' case he did that well before he went to his death on the cross. In front of God and

everybody, he pronounced Zacchaeus a full member of the chosen people, not someone to elbow aside because he's rich and you hate him, but a neighbor and a brother. Luke of all people, the gospel writer who looks out for the poor, tells us this story.

I wonder if this story, like the story of the prodigal son, is being told for the benefit of the "good" protagonist. Remember in the prodigal son story, how the elder son comes huffing up to his father all mad about the party being thrown for the prodigal, and his father says, You could have had a party any time you wanted. Why begrudge this celebration for your brother? You're not losing anything; you're gaining back your brother. My students always get mad about that; they say, "That's not fair!" totally identifying with the older brother because they're good and responsible people like him (if not warm-hearted and infinitely loving like the father). So I wonder if Luke means for us to identify with the crowd here, and be rebuked by Jesus' statement of inclusion. For anybody who loves Luke's emphasis on the poor, having a "chief tax collector" embraced by Jesus is a real dash of cold water. But it's also a *dramatic* demonstration of the salvific power of the traveling rabbi who meets us as we are and transforms us where we stand.

Zacchaeus is roped right back into the community and makes public his intention or his practice of undermining the damage his tax-collecting does to the community. The *crowd* is set back on their heels by the rearrangement of the family system in which Zacchaeus was the safe guy to hate and elbow aside. The community is transformed into one in which everybody belongs. They are "saved" not by a salvific death on the cross but by a living rabbi who butts in to undo the

living death that is this little town's social order. Jesus not only died to liberate people; he *lived* to liberate people. Saving the lost is not something that happens at the time of death; Jesus saved the lost in the middle of their lives, even when they weren't asking for it.

Andrew Hanauer, who's been our contact at Jubilee, is starting a non-profit organization where people on opposite sides of the political divide do service projects together. It's something like what Eboo Patel does with college students of different religious traditions, putting them to work on projects during which they come to know and appreciate each other's perspective. The 2016 election galvanized Andrew to try to do something to bridge the divide, and he thinks that when people work together, they're less likely to scapegoat or "other" other people, and this might be a way to heal the division in our society. That would be new life, wouldn't it?

I like to imagine Zacchaeus the next day being greeted quietly by people who used to ignore him. Perhaps someone stood aside on a crowded street to let him through. Maybe a Girl Scout decided not to skip his house this year, and Mrs. Zacchaeus bought ten boxes of cookies. Maybe someone invited them to the block party. It's hard to live with the tension of including someone who works for a hated entity, but maybe Jesus' visit was the kick in the pants they all needed to become the people they needed to be. Maybe we will also find ways to be brothers and sisters to those whose politics and values appall us, and maybe they will to us, by the grace of God. Jesus saves, in death and in life.

Lord of the lost,

We are quick to judge and slow to accept those whom we consider lower than ourselves. But you show us the way of acceptance, forgiveness, and peace. We honor your name for teaching us to love, for the sake of the one who is the essence of love itself, Jesus Christ our loving Lord. Amen.