

## Letting Go & Opting In

Luke 19:1-10

Ute Molitor, First Congregational UCC, November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2019

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

Zacchaeus was one of my favorite Bible characters when I was a child. One of our assignments during "First Communion instruction" in my Roman Catholic home parish was to draw our favorite character. I must have been around eight or nine years old and spent a lot of time alone at night because my parents and older siblings were busy and away. I think I related to Zacchaeus because he was small (19:3) and seemed to feel a bit alone. It made total sense to me that Zacchaeus ran through the crowd and climbed a sycamore tree to see Jesus better (19:4). I still remember that my attempts to draw a picture of Zacchaeus sitting in a tree brought me to tears, partly because I just couldn't get it right. My older sister who is a phenomenal artist had compassion and helped me out. With her help, Jesus also made it into my picture. You see, I loved the fact that Jesus stopped under the tree, saw Zacchaeus and invited himself to be Zacchaeus' guest. I wanted to spend time with Jesus, too.

I doubt that I had any inkling as to why Zacchaeus was alone. As a tax collector, he acted like an independent contractor for the Roman occupiers. Zacchaeus was regarded as a traitor among his own people. Tax collectors were denied citizen's rights and privileges such as giving testimony in court. They were seen as untrustworthy! Interestingly, his name means something like *pure, innocent or clean* but Zacchaeus was seen as unclean in a moral and religious sense. Zacchaeus was even the chief tax collector and may well have lined his pockets collecting the money. He would have paid the Romans the expected tax ahead of time. Then he would get other tax collectors to help collect the money, likely charging higher than was owed. We are

told that he was quite rich but the reference to his height may actually be an image for how small his heart, mind, and vision are at the beginning of our story despite his material riches.

Something drives Zacchaeus to seek out Jesus who has become known as a healer, prophet and powerful preacher. A grown man of his time would ordinarily not be seen running and climbing up a tree amidst a crowd. Yet, Zacchaeus is desperate to see Jesus who is on his way to Jerusalem. Jesus will face condemnation and death for breaking open the perceived gates of God's mercy and belonging. Every step of the way, Jesus is reaching out to people who are on the margins of his society and of the official institutional version of the religion of his day. This is why Jesus seeks out Zacchaeus. When Jesus stands under the sycamore tree, he calls out to him: "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today (19:5)." No one in the crowd would have even considered crossing Zacchaeus threshold and here is Jesus elevating him to a worthy host. Zacchaeus does not hesitate! He is so excited! In typical fashion, everyone else is grumbling about Jesus hanging out with so called sinners. Zacchaeus stands and faces Jesus. Then he takes a virtual step big enough to transform his life by saying: "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much."

What is happening with Zacchaeus? By inviting himself into Zacchaeus' home, Jesus is essentially holding up a mirror for him that affirms that Zacchaeus, too, has been made in the image of God though he struggles to grow into the likeness of God. Something in this reaffirmation unbinds Zacchaeus. Unbinds him from what? The late Christian monk Father Thomas Keating liked to say that we all have programs for achieving personal happiness. Maybe we are trying to secure a sense of power and control at all cost and protect ourselves from the messiness of human love. Or we have a program aimed at always gaining the affection of others through our appeasing and pleasing. Or we try to get a sense of worth through acquiring things and wealth as a kind of personal security blanket. Father Thomas Merton used to say that we tend to act like crows. We pick up anything that glitters and shines and put it into our nests no matter how uncomfortable it becomes to rest it in anymore.

Minyak Rinpoche, the leader of the group of Tibetan monks who blessed us with their presence and teaching on compassion and impermanence, spoke of similar matters in his Dharma Talk on Thursday. He mentioned how important it is to become aware of our own emotional programs, especially how we let negative emotions like anger, jealousy, hatred and greed run amok. We can probably add shame and blame to that list. He stressed the importance of learning to name these emotions early in the process and to learn to let go of them.

I wonder whether Zacchaeus was originally hanging on to greed as a way of assuring some measure of power or control. Maybe he thought that accruing wealth could make him feel good. We might imagine this character being teased about his size or something else when he was growing up. He has been trying to build himself up but seems to have lost touch with how his actions are contributing to the suffering of others. When Zacchaeus decides to give half of his possessions to the poor, he is practicing letting go of his personal and private program for happiness. When he decides to offer four fold of any defrauding he may have done, he is taking responsibility and opting into the well-being of others. When he decides to share his wealth with the poor, perhaps his heart is slowly widening with an actual spirit of compassion for others who struggle and suffer. He is letting go and opting in. As Zacchaeus steps forth in our story, Jesus declares that healing and transformation have come to Zacchaeus' house. By saying publicly that Zacchaeus, too, "is a son of Abraham [and Sarah]," Jesus is declaring that Zacchaeus is worthy of a place in his community.

The very word that we translate as existence means to take a stand or step out or to step into being (in the Greek and Latin). When Zacchaeus steps out by taking a stance, he is also opting for *interbeing*<sup>1</sup> – relating to all other created beings. Perhaps we can even say that he is now accepting that his and all our lives are precious and interconnected. They are also impermanent and we are called to be present to the present moment rather than cling to our old stories over and over again. Maintaining the reconnection, however, takes practice with the aid of the Holy Spirit. One thing Buddhists can remind us of is that we all need to practice our faith in order to

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<sup>1</sup> This is a term I first heard when reading Thich Nhat Hanh. It has been adopted by other faith leaders such as Richard Rohr (Center for Action and Contemplation, [www.cac.org](http://www.cac.org)).

become more stabilized in deeper truths. Our Christian faith originally has many such practices. As I have mentioned before, I hope we can continue to reconnect to more of them in our life together (like chanting, lectio divina, meditation, etc.). We are all called to become mindful of the false attachments we cling to. We are called to grow deeper in our compassion toward ourselves and all created being as our hearts widen more and more.

I would like to share a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) with you that speaks of our origin with God, our being led out into existence, and the need to remember and embrace our interconnectedness over and over again:

*God speaks to each of us as [God] makes us,  
then walks with us silently out of the night.  
These are the words we dimly hear:  
You, sent out beyond your recall,  
go to the limits of your longing.  
Embody me.  
Flare up like flame  
and make big shadows I can move in.  
Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.  
Just keep going. No feeling is final.  
Don't let yourself lose me.  
Nearby is the country they call life.  
You will know it by its seriousness.  
Give me your hand.*

May we all dare to reach out for God's hand as Zacchaeus did in our story that we may over and over again reenter the country they call life as we let go and opt in, exposing ourselves to beauty and terror, daring to flare up like flame. May the Holy Spirit guide us to recover a kind of innocence/belovedness (*Zacchaeus*) that rests in God before we were even born. Thanks be to God.