

“What Can I Trust?”
Hosea 14; Ephesians 2:1-9
John 1:14-18; Luke 19:1-10

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Over the last couple of weeks we have talked about the parable of the Prodigal, and the older son, and the father. It's interesting, as we begin to think about the New Testament story, that we listen to a story that Jesus tells. In that story there are some characters. There's the character of the father; there's the character of the prodigal; there's the character of the older son, and you might say there's the character of the townspeople, although they are in the background. We listen to the story and find these characters come to life.

As we begin to hear about those different characters, you might wonder why Jesus is telling us a story. One of the things about a story, especially one like that, is that it can work as a mirror. We might see ourselves in it. We find a reflection of who we are.

Jesus told this story just after the Pharisees were giving him a hard time. He's trying to bring grace, so he tells a story about grace. He tells about a person, the older son, who doesn't want to accept grace. Maybe the Pharisees could have found their reflection in the older son. Maybe Jesus was asking them if they could welcome the prodigal. So as we hear these stories of the New Testament, we begin to be invited into these stories where the characters might help us reflect on our own story.

Today we hear the story of Zacchaeus, and it's an interesting story. He's a little guy who is rich and probably powerful because he's rich. In those days, when somebody was a head tax collector, they were the one who signed a contract with Rome to do the tax collecting for the city or the region. We don't know exactly. It's in Jericho, so it's at least Jericho. He's not somebody that everybody liked, for a couple of reasons. One, he was fraternizing with the enemy. He helped Rome. He was taking money from his own people and passing it on to Rome. That felt like something that was wrong. And two, he was rich. In those days, rich people were not considered very ethical, probably even thieves. So he was despised by his own people and he had questionable moral character. The relationship with his tribe was broken.

As we hear this story, we see Zacchaeus wanting to come and see Jesus. What's that about? It's interesting that the word “see” in Greek means to perceive, or discern, or even to have some kind of spiritual understanding. There's something that's driving Zacchaeus to learn more about who Jesus is.

I've always recognized that Zacchaeus must have had a struggle going on. He wanted to be accepted. He wanted to be a part of his people, even though he had a contract with Rome. The crowd had shut him out. They had shut him out in two ways. First, they shut him out because he was too small and he couldn't come in. It's kind of amazing this rich and probably powerful person can't make his way through the crowd. It's almost as if they are saying, “We're not going to let you in. We don't like you.”

Then, when Jesus goes with Zacchaeus, the crowd murmurs. We could probably spend some time on murmuring, but they were twittering together—today it probably would be Twittering—about Jesus. “Look what he’s doing! He’s going with a sinner!”

Then we come to the part of the story that I always thought was a great conversion story. Except that I re-read it and looked at the Greek verbs. Zacchaeus must hear the murmuring, too, because he says, “I give away half of my wealth to the poor and if I have defrauded anyone, I have paid it back four times.” He’s not saying, “I *will* give,” even though the New Revised Standard Version translates it that way. The text actually is present tense. He’s saying, “I *do* these things.” It gives me a different perspective on Zacchaeus.

You see, Zacchaeus is probably one of those tax collectors who went to John when he was baptizing people in the Jordan and repented. Now he’s really trying to live out this turn to God, so he came to see Jesus. He’s seeking out the one who might help him to go even further, one who may enable him to become a child of God because he knows he’s changed.

That’s one of the themes of this story—people can change. We can change in various ways. Zacchaeus is changed by repenting. He wants to be one of God’s people. He has recognized what John said. He recognizes that Jesus is taking that message even further and inviting him to become one of the family. When Jesus comes and says, “I want to go to your house and sit at the table with you,” he’s saying, “You are part of my community.”

The crowd is not happy with that. This guy is working for the Romans. He’s got this contract with the Romans. He’s probably been a sinner. And Jesus says, “I want to come and let you be part of my family. I want to be part of your family.” Part of what I’m wondering if what he’s saying to the crowd is, “God is at work among you and you haven’t seen it. Zacchaeus has changed.” Can we see that change? Can we see God at work among us?

There are times where we tend to think that the majority has the right idea, that the crowd is generally right, and yet we know that’s not always the case. I wonder if this is one of those instances of the crowd not seeing what God is doing. They are not seeing. I want to talk a little bit about a story about not seeing—the Nazis. I know that was a bad transition—not see/Nazi.

The crowd was not seeing what God was doing because as we join together in a crowd sometimes we can get taken off track. There’s a recent book by Sebastian Haffner called *Defying Hitler*. I haven’t read the book, but I want to read you just a little bit from a review by Dan Hitchens.

Haffner’s memoir invokes the all-pervasive nature of Nazism. “It seeped through the walls like poison gas,” he writes. Work, leisure, family, and friendship offered no refuge. When Hitler becomes chancellor,

life seems to carry on as normal: The shops are still open, the cinemas and dance halls are still full. And yet, Haffner writes, private conversations are soon infected by "a new intolerance and heated readiness to hate." People are carried away, first by intimidation, and then by the intoxication of being part of a movement, until normal daily events seem changed with ideological meaning. There was an "unrelenting pressure to think about politics all the time." A conversation between friends becomes an argument, then a tense row, then an open threat of being reported to the Gestapo.

Then from another book called *My Battle Against Hitler* by Dietrich von Hildebrand, in which Von Hildebrand frequently reflects on the psychology of resistance and surrender. He writes:

"There is a moment when intimidation and paralysis set in to such a degree that one becomes passive in the face of something harmful, no longer actively resisting, even though the possibility of resistance still exists." People start to believe that history unfolds inevitably, that one may as well make the best of a bad situation.

What I'm trying to suggest is that here we see a crowd making the wrong choice, not recognizing God at work. That crowd is so easy to be part of, and yet there is an invitation here to keep our eyes open to see where God is at work in unexpected places around us, like Zacchaeus. It's also an invitation to do some reflection, to let this story be a mirror for us, and ask, "Who are we in Jesus' story?" Are we one who has recognized that God has given us grace? Are we the one to recognize that Jesus comes in grace and truth, grace upon grace? Are we the one to make that decision that enables us to listen, to seek, to hear Jesus say, "Come sit at my table?" Are we able to see how God is at work among us in spite of the unrelenting pressures of our times?

As much as I always want to be that person who sees God at work, I know how easy it is at times to not be that person, to find the ways that others are different and why grace shouldn't be given. This story is an invitation to remember that as we open our hearts again to grace, as we let Jesus invite us to his table (and Zacchaeus, too, and whoever that Zacchaeus is for us), to recognize that we're all invited to the table. We are invited to keep our eyes open for how God might be at work in our lives and among us in surprising and unexpected ways, and what characters God may be using to do God's work. We are invited to come and recognize that through Christ, together, we can be alive in a family of faith through the guidance of Jesus Christ.

As I reflect, I wonder again. I'm thankful for this time to come forward again and say, "Jesus, help me see. Help me see how God is at work in my life and in whom God might be at work. Help me not just get caught up in a particular ideology or a particular way of thinking. Let me let you be my guide. Let me become like Zacchaeus."

Amen.