

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

Moments of Connection

Gospel Lesson

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."

Bible/Sermon Focus

One of the tensions between the Roman Empire and the Jewish people arose from the taxation system of Rome. In Rome, citizens participated in what was called the "temple cult." Citizens would go to the local temple and present their taxes as an offering to the gods. This proved to be a problem for the Jewish community, as the first two rules of the Ten Commandments are to have no other Gods and to not worship idols. So, Rome had to find a different way to collect taxes from these areas.

Zacchaeus was tax collector. He was a member of the Jewish community that was expected to collect and turn in taxes to Rome. Tax collectors' salaries were decided by themselves. They were to collect extra to earn a living. But Rome didn't monitor *how much* extra. Zacchaeus, like many tax collectors, took advantage of his own community, extorting more than he needed, leaving many broke and struggling to make ends meet.

This was also one of Rome's tactics to control populations, pitting members of groups against each other so they would not organize and rise against Rome. If tax collectors, like Zacchaeus, were considered an enemy of the people, those same people would likely focus their energies on Zacchaeus and folk like him, instead of on the creators of the unjust system of empire they were all forced to live under (including Zacchaeus). After all, it's not like the Jewish people of Jericho would have had daily encounters with legislators or even Caesar himself. No, they had encounters with Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was the symbol of extortion, not Rome.

But even though Zacchaeus's unjust actions were small in comparison to those of the empire, they were still big injustices to those whom Zacchaeus extorted. And for this, Zacchaeus was not trusted, and as a result was ostracized by the majority of people. Tax collectors had a reputation. It's all over the Gospels. And since Zacchaeus did not have community to make him feel safe and loved, he used money to fill that hole.

Many of us have been in a place on our lives in which we have been unable to engage with others. Maybe a season of depression took us over, or we let our work become our lives. Being an active and engaged participant in our own lives is actually something we can risk losing. And sometimes we don't engage with our own lives or with others because it's messy, because we will risk getting our hearts broken and find ourselves caring for others. And when we don't engage in our own lives, we don't engage with others, and so we don't have community. But so much of who we are is found in others. And Jesus knew that, God knows that, the Spirit witnesses to that.

How many people would have loved the opportunity to have lunch with Jesus the day he entered Jericho. But Jesus asked Zacchaeus. Jesus asked the one who had no one, and who treated people like the didn't deserve to be seen or cared for. And Zacchaeus found himself available to Jesus and to God. And then the messy beautiful work of being restored back into community began for Zacchaeus. He felt things, he felt bad about what he had done and he worked to make it right. He no longer wanted to live as someone pitted against neighbor but to stand with and be part of the community.

In this sermon series, Make Us One, we are considering how we are united not by our own uniformity but by the power of the Holy Spirit. We are considering how we are united by God's priorities, not by our own. Showing up for each other, being available to each other and to God, is the only way that we can witness to this work in the Spirit. It requires community. It requires being part of community. And some days we may not feel like showing up, and that's okay. But we should always remember that often when we do show up, we may find ourselves hosting the Triune God in our midst.

Discussion Questions

1. When have you not wanted to show up to something that you knew was important?
2. When have you witnessed people "living in such a profoundly unjust system they have to do unjust things to stay alive?"
3. What do we do with our neighbors that we know purposely defraud the rest of society? Can we do anything to change the hearts of these neighbors? Can God?
4. When have you felt like you are not an active and engaged participant in your own life?
5. Why did Zacchaeus go to see Jesus that day?

Prayer

God of Unity, give us empathy for those who become so disconnected from themselves that they no longer are available to community or to you. Send you Spirit into our lives urging us to connect more and more to our neighbors and your mission, each day. Amen.

"Rome was a vicious, violent, and acutely oppressive regime. Living in such a profoundly unjust society might require one to do things outside of their integrity to stay alive."