

I Just Can't Do That
Luke 19:1-10

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*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 as the Savior passed that way he looked up in the tree.
And he said, 'Zacchaeus, you come down!
For I'm going to your house today. For I'm going to your house today.'*

Oh, that's how we know this story, isn't it? We love this story, mainly because we love this song. It is one of those stories that we learned as a child by singing—sorta like Jacob's Ladder, the Arky-Arky song. Wonderful songs for children.

And it is a wonderful story—especially for all the short people in the world—those who felt persecuted by the Randy Newman song from many years ago; even those of us who grew up with dreams of being able to slam dunk a basketball, but realize that those dreams are just that—unless we lower the goal to about 7 feet, and that is becoming a stretch. This is a story for all those who never got to be on the back row at picture time, who were always picked last because they were small. This is THE story for all the short people in the world!

And maybe that is why this is such a great children's story, why it resonates so in Sunday School classrooms where the chairs are close to the floor. They are used to living in a world where everything is larger than they are. Children are used to always having to strain their necks, to look up just to see big people's eyes. They are used to having their arms always raised as they cross the street, as they walk through the store. But this story gives them the chance to be the hero. This is a children's story!

And maybe that is the problem. This has become a children's story. We have morphed it into a cute little story. We have treated this story the same way we have many of the Grimm brother's tales, which in their original were dark, almost demented tales, hardly suited for bedtime stories unless you want to be up all night! We have taken this tale of Zacchaeus and neutered it into something safe for children, because we don't want to wrestle with the nightmare it presents for us adults. And in doing so we have taken away the scandal, we have taken away the struggle. For at its core, this story presents us another one of Luke's tales that turn conventional wisdom on its head.

As we have seen, Luke does not have a lot to say about affluent people. A few weeks ago we discovered the only person in Luke's gospel that Jesus said was in hell was there because he was rich and did not care for the poor man outside his gate. In the chapter just preceding our lesson for this morning we have the story of the good man, a ruler who came to Jesus seeking eternal life and Jesus instruction to him was to sell everything he has and give it to the poor, and when he cannot, or would not, Jesus makes the point that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.

Luke doesn't hold out a lot of hope for the rich! There aren't a lot of possibilities for them, for us! As we read through this gospel we are beginning to get the picture!

And so Jesus comes to Jericho. He is the big draw in town and the people are lined up 6-7 deep to try to catch a glimpse of him; not unlike those who lined up to catch a glimpse of Queen Elizabeth's coffin moving through London. They wanted to be able to say, "I saw Jesus when he came to Jericho!"

Among the crowd is Zacchaeus, and the next few words tell it all. "He was a chief tax collector, and was rich." In many ways that is redundant, repetitive and says the same thing over and over again! If he was the chief tax collector of course he was rich!

And he had gotten his wealth the old fashioned way—he had earned it! At least that is how Zacchaeus saw it. The Romans had fashioned a system to collect taxes from their far-flung empire. They appointed a chief tax collector who had the responsibility of sending Rome a certain amount of money each year. If the revenue got to Rome all was well. If it didn't, it was the chief tax collector's head that was on the line—or chopping block—literally! All they wanted was the money! How that was collected was not their concern!

Imagine for a moment that you had that job, and Raleigh said that you needed to send \$50,000 every month to the coffers. How would you do it? Tax income—you can do that. But what if you decided instead to tax every car that passed through our county! Imagine how much money you would bring in if there was a toll booth on the road in Kernersville, right at South Main St. and I-40! Of course, you don't have to pay it. You can take a different route. But do you really want to take the backroads to through High Point?

The latest estimates are that every day there are 43,000 cars that pass by! And remember, you only have to send Raleigh \$50,000 a month! You would make that in 2 days! Do you see the profit in this!

That is how Zacchaeus had gotten rich. He had added another tax to the people's burden in order to pad his pocket. He hadn't done anything wrong. He had played by the system; he had worked his way up the ladder; he had succeeded! He was rich! And hated!

Everyone knew that he had colluded with the Romans. Think the carpetbaggers who moved into the south after the Civil War. Hated, despised—maybe behind their backs, but hated none the less. Hated for their betrayal, hated for their using the system, hated for their success.

But as Jesus came into town they had a small chance at revenge. For once, they would be tall and keep him from seeing the person EVERYONE wanted to see. They would have their little bit of revenge!

But Zacchaeus had not gotten ahead by playing it safe, so he ran ahead of the crowd and climbed out of on a limb. And Jesus saw him! Jesus saw this RICH TAX COLLECTOR! And we all know what is going to happen now! Jesus is going to give it to him!

But then Jesus turns the tables on all of us and declares that he must go to his home!

Jesus has just turned his back on everything that he had said in the last few chapters! What happened to the Jesus who sent the rich man to hell for not caring for the

poor? What happened to give everything to the poor? What happened to the camel in the eye of the needle? What has happened to Jesus?

But before we can get an answer to that, we have to wonder what has happened to Zacchaeus? It seems that a radical change takes place. I don't know what Jesus said to Zacchaeus on the way to his house. But I wish I did! It was by far the greatest stewardship testimony in the history of the world, for Zacchaeus makes an incredible pledge.

"Lord, half of all my possessions I will give to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone, I will repay them 4 times what I took."

Talk about a commitment card!

Stewardship is always a touchy subject in churches. No matter where you are, it is tough. Especially this year with the economic news being as grim as it is! Stewardship, giving—it is a tough subject!

And the question always comes, what should I give? Unlike some religious groups, we don't have a membership fee, or dues that everyone is expected to pay. We don't come up with a budget and then divide that number out among members and send you a bill.

So what should you give? Well, the biblical answer is a tithe—10% of your income. That is an easy enough number to come up with—just take your pay check and move the decimal to the left one position and write the check. But many of us just go numb thinking about doing such a thing? We have over-committed ourselves with mortgages, credit cards, car payments, college tuition, that we often have more month left already when the money runs out—let alone thinking about giving 10% of our income to the church! It's just not possible!

And maybe that is the real point of this story. Zacchaeus gave more than was possible. It is impossible to do what Zacchaeus did! Just do the math. For the sake of discussion, let's say that half of all that Zacchaeus had earned was "ill-gotten gain." He had earned it by cheating. That is a conservative estimate according to most scholars, and most businesses today. Most will mark items up nearly 100% above their cost.

And let's say that Zacchaeus had a net worth of \$1,000,000. \$500,000 of that is going to be given to the poor. He will then own 4 times to anyone he has cheated. Which is pretty much everyone in town! Zacchaeus owes more than he has. He just can't do that!

What do we give? Zachaeus was in the same predicament we are in as we fill out our pledge cards. And what he filled out took him the rest of his life to make good. And maybe that is the point! Oh, I am sure that there were those outside that day that thought that Zacchaeus was just trying to buy his way into heaven—and maybe he was! And maybe it worked. Not because of the amount that he wrote down, but because of what it was going to cost him. It cost him the rest of his life, the same thing it would cost Jesus.

We are going to be thinking about stewardship for the next few weeks. Stewardship is a lifestyle, how we use all the gifts God gives us—time, talents, and yes, finances. It isn't about the money, but about how much of ourselves we are willing to trust God with. Do we trust God enough to care for our needs, or do we want to cling to what we have, what we have earned? Zacchaeus had done that for so long—and had been very successful at it. But he didn't have a life until he did the impossible—gave it all away. On that day the camel did

pass through the eye of the needle. On that day Jesus said, salvation came to his house. May it be so in your house, and our house today.