

## “Welcomed Home”

Joel 2:21-27

Luke 19:1-10

We like to tell the story of Zacchaeus – especially to kids. After all, they can identify with being shorter than everybody else and not being able to see in a crowd. They know what it’s like when being little means that you keep missing out on important stuff. Lots of us remember climbing trees when we were kids and seeing Zacchaeus recognized for his outside the box idea feels – I don’t know – delightful and familiar.

But let’s revisit this story and see what else we can find. We know that the history of the people of Israel was filled with hardship – being outnumbered, facing starvation and slavery, fighting wars, being conquered and exiled, rebuilding with threats all around them. Then, something incredible happened. The Maccabees revolted against the empire and won. For about fifty years, Israel was completely independent, completely self-ruled. They were free; they were proud. They took their place on the world stage...until Rome rose in power. First, they were forced to pay taxes to Rome and then they were utterly conquered. By the time of Jesus’s ministry, it had been about ninety years since Israel had been free. That’s certainly recent enough for the stories of glory days to be fresh in the peoples’ memories. It’s maybe even recent enough for a very few elders to still be alive with memories of those better days. To live as a conquered people meant that your very existence counted on the whims of the conquerors. Would they come to town today to force you to fight a war you didn’t care about? Would they suddenly pass a law preventing you from worshiping as you believed you should? Would they raise taxes or decide that you weren’t loyal enough to the empire and come to slaughter your people? Nothing was ever really certain.

And we find Jesus as he enters Jericho – a place rich in wealth and trade. We meet Zacchaeus, whose name means “pure” or “innocent,” but right away we learn that he is neither – a chief tax collector who is rich. Now, a chief tax collector would be someone who paid Rome for the right and privilege of taxing a particular district. Rome would tell you how much money was owed from your territory and you would hire as many agents as you would like to collect that money. But, really, the chief tax collector and his agents would collect as much money as they could and only turn over as much as they had to to Rome. The entire system was built on exploitation and corruption and that’s how these folks got wealthy. Now, it was bad enough when a Roman citizen bought the rights to tax a district, but can you imagine how you would feel – how enraged you would be – if the person taxing your district was another child of Israel? As if it weren’t bad enough to be conquered and gouged, but the man locally responsible was an utter traitor to his people...whose name means “pure” or “innocent.” I can’t imagine that he would have even wanted to live among his people or that he would have been welcomed as anyone’s neighbor. His betrayal was shameful and unapologetic and flaunted before all with his ill-gotten wealth.

Zacchaeus was short in stature. We can certainly read this and say that he was a short man – it fits with all the details of the story, for certain. But, just like in English, we can also say that he was a small man – that he was petty, lacking honor, undignified. He was short in stature, in maturity – he made himself low in the eyes of his people. His is a life washed deeply in shame.

Years ago, I got into a polite debate with one of my seminary professors about shame. She suggested that shame can be used for good and I saw shame as more of a destructive force in our lives. What is shame if not the belief that who we are or what we have done makes us

fundamentally unworthy, less than, fit to be cast out of society? Shame can exist solely in our own minds – imagining that people would hate us or flee from us if only they knew. Or, shame can be a force that we exert on each other to punish or urge a change we feel entitled to as a society. It is a force that is individual and familial and communal and national. Certainly, there are things that people do that are so egregious, they are worthy of this kind of social pressure: child abuse, human trafficking, defrauding the vulnerable. But, so often, we use shame for things that are inconsequential: for those who are seen as weighing too much or too little, people considered unattractive or unstylish, people who do anything imperfectly. The list goes on and on as we bind ourselves and one another with contempt and scorn.

Whatever the purpose, for good intentions or for ill, shame can lock us into the track we are on. Zacchaeus had used his power and influence to deeply harm his own people. They knew who he was; they whispered about him and railed against him. He wasn't welcome anywhere. Well...why should he ever do any differently? As long as he was so hated, as long as everyone knew just who he was, why not keep making money in the process?

Except that...except that he wanted to see Jesus. And we don't know what exactly he had heard about Jesus or why he felt compelled to go. We know that even being in a crowd of his own people was a risk to him. Maybe he went up the tree both to see Jesus and to get a little bit of distance from that crowd that would love to have his head if they could.

And Jesus looks up and says he wants to go to Zacchaeus's house. He sees this man who has fallen so far and yet he still hasn't given up on him. He sees a life awash in truly terrible decisions and seemingly boundless shame and he says, "I must stay at your house today." Jesus looks at one of the worst sinners around and shows him grace and Zacchaeus is happy because he recognizes the shocking grace of this somewhat impertinent self-invitation.

What is the antidote to shame? It is an honest reckoning of who you are and what you have done. It is the vulnerability to come into the light, to make a change for the better. It is grasping hold of hope that you can still be embraced one day. To heal hearts hurt by shame, the best balm is love itself. Shame is fear of being rejected; love is acceptance and welcoming the lost home.

When we look at our passage from Joel this morning, we find a great message of hope. One of the curious things about this book is that we don't know when it was written – before the exile, during the exile, or after the return. But, in some ways, the timing of it doesn't matter as much as the clarity and beauty of its promise. What we find is a revelation to people who have gone through hard times, of loss, of want. So often, the good news feels most profound to people who feel the lowest. Joel wants us to look with awe and wonder at the miracles and blessings of God. All the ways that the world brings us low, that we drag one another down, that we torture ourselves in our own minds – these pale in comparison to the wondrous things that God has done. If it is all too much for us, if we can never meet the pressures of society or our own stern inner critic – see, the prophet calls us to find joy, to rejoice in the Lord. We are not worthless, dishonored, forgotten people. The pastures are green, the land is fruitful, the rains come, the years of sorrow are not endless.

As the world stretches and strains to the final days, we hear this word from God, “my people shall never again be put to shame.” We will not blanch from fear and powerlessness; we will not blush from embarrassment and failure. We will know that God is in our midst. We will see ourselves and each other as children of God. If that is so, if we truly embrace this holy truth, how can we ever submit to shame? If Jesus can look into the heart of one of the worst sinners

around and say – I will eat with you, I will believe in you, I will love you – doesn't he do the same for all of us? And see what a change comes over Zacchaeus!

When I think about this story...Zacchaeus offers to give away what he has, to lift up the poor and pay back those he has harmed so readily. You might say that is the power of Jesus to change a heart and you may well be right. But I think what I would like to believe is that Zacchaeus had wanted to make this change for years. He knew he didn't want to be this person anymore, but the shame he held onto in his own heart, the shame he faced whenever he was around his own people made it seem impossible. It wasn't until Jesus looked him in the eye and opened the door for him to be honorable once more that Zacchaeus leapt at the chance.

Jesus wants to stay at your house today. What are the locks affixed to the door? What are the deadbolts and chains we keep fastening, falsely believing that we are the unlovable ones? Whatever our barriers, Jesus knows the way through – but how wonderful it is to see those locks and bolts and chains, cast them aside ourselves, and throw open the door to our hearts! Child of God, you are loved and welcomed by the source of life and the author of creation. The Lord is in our midst. Release the trap of shame and be glad in the mercy of grace. Amen.