

Re-imagination as Re-formation

Luke 19:1-10

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You would definitely recognize him if you saw him. Short of stature, expensive clothes, hefty change purse, he reeks of new money. When he pompously walks through the dusty streets of Jericho, people clear out of the way not because he is admired—quite the opposite, in fact. They move because he repulses them.

The tax system of the Roman Empire was notoriously corrupt, and Zacchaeus was the area's chief tax collector. Folks like Zacchaeus bid for the right to tax the people, and since the margins were thin, he amassed wealth by taxing more than he paid to Caesar. It was technically legal but morally ambiguous work. Imagine the Beatles' song, "Taxman." "Should five per cent appear too small / Be thankful I don't take it all!" Yeah, that is who everyone in Jericho thought Zacchaeus was.

Then one day as Zacchaeus walks down the street, people are not avoiding him as usual. Throngs of people crowd the village center. They bump past him and hardly notice that he is there, because they are so drawn to this person that Zacchaeus cannot even see. Being a clever man, Zacchaeus notices a sycamore tree in the distance and scales it to catch an unencumbered look.

You know the rest of the story. Jesus comes over to Zacchaeus and invites him to dinner. Per usual, the crowd and the religious authorities point out the sinner's shortcomings and are shocked that Jesus would keep such company. Zacchaeus, in awe of Jesus' presence, turns from his corrupt ways and gives generously to the poor. This is a classic Lukan repentance story. Jesus loves on the sinners, and they have a miraculous change of heart.

But, is that really what is going on here? According to the translation you just heard, when confronted with the crowd's grumblings and the presence of Jesus, Zacchaeus promises to change his ways. The verbs of his declaration are all translated in the future tense and reflect Zacchaeus's intention to give to the poor.

However, the original Greek verbs of this story are in the present tense. For example, the King James Version stays truer to the Greek and reads, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor, and if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold." Many contemporary commentators believe this older translation is actually closer to the story's intended meaning. In their opinion, the

crowd judges Zacchaeus unfairly and he subsequently instructs them about generosity. The commentators make a compelling argument that this is not a repentance story, and push us to re-imagine what generosity looks like. The crowd is guilty of judging Zacchaeus unfairly, guilty of a lack of imagination for pigeon holing him into a stereotype.

It would not be the last time religious people suffered from misguided imaginations, particularly with regards to money. In the Roman Catholic Church of the Middle Ages, salvation was seen as something totally otherworldly. You believed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ so you could go to heaven. You followed the rules of the church to avoid the excruciating moral cleansing of purgatory before you entered heaven. You did not technically earn your salvation; God was merciful because he disproportionately rewarded those who put forth an honest effort.

When the church was running low on money, they would sell indulgences to raise capital. Indulgences were opportunities the Church gave the laity to get right with God for past indiscretions—usually for a small fee, of course. One preacher in Germany, Johann Tetzel, even came up with a clever sales pitch, "As soon as a coin in the coffer rings / the soul from purgatory springs." It was incredibly effective, and people flocked from surrounding villages to give.

There was, of course, another preacher in Germany, who found this practice to be a distortion of the Christian faith. Through his study of scripture and early Christian writers, he re-imagined the popular theology of the time. He affirmed God's grace alone in the process of salvation. Legend has it that on October 31, 1517, 499 years ago tomorrow, Martin Luther posted his *95 Theses* on the Door of Wittenberg Castle. It was a re-imagining that challenged the theological status quo and sparked what would become the Protestant Reformation.

In our time, academics claim that the Church is in the midst of another reformation. You have heard the scary trends and statistics of the Western Church in decline. Faith communities are facing the challenges in different ways. Some churches are struggling to keep the lights on and others are simply closing the doors. Back in my hometown, you can book an old Methodist Church that comfortably sleeps seven for \$129 per night on Airbnb. Just last night I ate dinner at a church converted into a Tex-Mex restaurant—orange paint and sombreros accented pews and stain glass windows. Other churches are staying open and leveraging their assets in creative ways to support the mission of the church. Every church that has a prayer of surviving is re-imagining and re-forming who they are.

Right here at First Church, we are diving into the re-imagining and re-forming process head first. Over the past year, we re-organized our church governance to become more nimble and nurturing of the creativity and enthusiasm of our members. We are reaching out into the community in new ways with our refugee resettlement effort. Our faith formation programming for our children, youth, and adults is strong with numerous classes, book groups, and mission projects. We have two aesthetically stunning services, Celtic Eucharist and Taize, offered once a month in addition to our Sunday morning service, and the leadership is hard at work launching a series of Dinner Church experiences beginning in December. There is also a team that has been working for most of this year on a vision to renovate the Meeting House in accordance with the church's Forward in Faith Statement. They are excited to reveal the fruits of their labors on November 13th and to begin the conversation of what we want the Meeting House to be for generations to come.

While there is no doubt that we institutionally are re-imagining and re-forming, the stewardship season is also about re-imagining and re-forming our personal relationship to the church. Each of us needs to prayerfully discern what present and future ministries we will dedicate ourselves to in the year ahead. Then we have to ask ourselves if our contributions of time and money reflect that commitment. Yes, we have institutional funds; yes, we are investigating alternative revenue streams. Nevertheless, the trajectory of First Church's necessary reformation depends upon the generosity of each of us.

The Gospel of Luke best explains generosity not with pronouncements but rather with stories. In the chapter before our reading today, Luke tells the story of a rich ruler who asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life—this is simply another way of asking how to live a life worth living. Jesus advises that he not only adhere to the law; Jesus advises the young ruler exceed the demands of the law and sell all his possessions to benefit the poor. Luke says, "When he heard this he became sad for he was very rich" (18:23). The very action that will bring the young ruler profound happiness is disheartening to him.

In Zacchaeus, Luke shows us a person who does not give away all of his possessions, but certainly exceeds the mandates of the law and the expectations of his fellow villagers. Having already made the leap to give generously, Zacchaeus' declaration is less a reflection of his defensiveness than of the pleasure he derives from giving. In the midst of the crowd's scorn, Luke describes Zacchaeus as "happily" or "joyfully" welcoming Jesus to his home.

It is easy to imagine that at one point Zacchaeus was as apprehensive to give as the young ruler. Nevertheless, he re-imagined and re-formed his generosity and discovered a life worth living. It does not escape Jesus' notice. Before leaving Zacchaeus, Jesus exclaims, "Today salvation has come to this house."

I believe that God is not done with First Church. Re-imagining and re-forming is not easy, yet it is in doing so that we experience Christ at our doorstep. Let us all experience the joy of sharing God's gifts with others. Amen.

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