

Invasive Grace Changes Everything

Luke 19:1-10

Rev. Rick Hull ~ June 23, 2019 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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.” (Luke 19:1-10, NRSV)



Last Sunday, our brother Karanja introduced us once again to the “*Merciful Jesus*” who would stop and heal a desperate, blind beggar as He entered Jericho. Today, Jesus continues His walk through town. And His mercy extends to yet another broken soul. But this one isn’t poor, and his only blindness is a blindness of the heart.

Zacchaeus, the tax gatherer, has sold out to the hated Romans. He has gotten rich by manipulating the tax system and robbing the people of Jericho. And frankly, he makes Ebenezer Scrooge look like Mother Theresa.

But, Jesus can heal *every* kind of brokenness. His grace is invasive. And His call is compelling. “*Come on Zac ... I’m eating with you ...*” and immediately his life was transformed, his portfolio was cut in half, and the one who had robbed the community became the source of hope and altruism!

So, what happened there under the sycamore tree? And what does it mean today – for believers and non-believers alike? The implications are huge. But to fully appreciate them, we need to read his story through the larger New Testament narrative. Years later, the Apostle Paul would write to his friends in Ephesus: “*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.*”

These lines are at the very core of what it means to respond to Jesus’ invitation. And they can help us understand what happened when Zacchaeus met Jesus!

First, though, just for a moment, let me put on my “church consultant” hat, and share a sad observation on our contemporary ecclesiastical context. We Kingdom folk ... especially in the west ... have spent too much time, and energy, and distraction on what ought to be a non-issue in the Christian movement. And I think it must break God’s heart.

It’s the debate between Christian Evangelism -and- Christian Activism.

On one side there is the call to receive Christ as Savior - - to know that sin is confessed and forgiven -- and to focus on what happens to us all after our short life on this earth. It’s a vital emphasis. And truly, without it, all of our efforts to make the world a better, safer, more peaceful place are a bit like straightening the pictures on the walls of a burning house.

On the other side is the Kingdom priority to honor the will and the ways of the One who is the Prince of Peace ... who healed disease, who set captives free, who wept over Jerusalem, and drove the criminal element out of the Temple. And truly, without this engagement in the needs of the community He loves, all our evangelism

can make us so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good.

And, with that tug between extremes, we believers sometimes find ourselves in an identity crisis, debating what we should be doing, how our preachers should be preaching, and what the Church is truly all about in the world. In some places there is a quiet undercurrent of discomfort. In others, it is a pitched battle for the soul of the ministry.

And this is where the Ephesians passage and the story of Zacchaeus can come to the rescue, and change the very nature of the conversation.

Writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul first presents the grace that reaches and saves us. It is the *essential transformational work* of the cross. It is the gift of God. You can't invent it, or institute it on our own. Everything begins simply in claiming that Saving Grace.

But then he moves immediately to the result of heart transformation! Verse 10 declares that we believers are being created in Christ Jesus for *all the works* that He modeled, *all the engagements* that He undertook, and *every activity* that He intends for His Kingdom.

In the divine economy, it will never be "either-or." It will always be "*both-and*!" In other words: **You and I are called to it all!**

The summons to repent, turn to Jesus, confess sin, and know the assurance of salvation must always be at the center of our message to the world. And the challenge to search our hearts for His callings, and then engage in the Kingdom works of compassion, and care must forever drive our lives and our lifestyles. In Zacchaeus, this divine agenda is powerfully put into practice.

Now we are ready for the passage of the day -- Luke 19:1-10. Once again, as is the case with so many Bible stories, we are only reading the outline. So, to get the full story, it may be helpful to read with a little imagination.

There is a diverse cast of characters here. There is, of course, Jesus and His team. Then there is Zacchaeus.

And the crowd walking with Jesus, and probably grouped at Zacchaeus' door, and leaning in his windows. And then there's the crowd reading his story (more on them later).

Now, everything Jesus does is a teaching event. Jesus had already told his men about the nature of Kingdom work. In Luke 4, He described it as being "*sent to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovering of sight to those who were blinded, to set at liberty the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*" And He was about to teach another lesson on the subject!

Now, shift the scene. A few blocks away, a lonely, broken, empty Zacchaeus heard the crowd, saw who was coming, and somehow knew that he had to see more. He ran as quickly as his short legs would go. He came to the crowd. And there they were -- all those big strong Israeli farm boys who he had cheated at tax time, all those families he had stolen from as they stood helplessly at the tax table under the scrutiny of Zac's armed Roman guards.

He said, "*Come on! Let me through!*" They looked around, saw him there, small, needy, and guard-less. And they closed ranks. One or two may have even stepped on his toes.

Zac was not just curious. He was desperate. Something inside said, "*This moment may never come again. He may not pass by here again. I have to see this Jesus!*" So, he did the most undignified thing (*and candidly, I think he provided an odd entertainment for those folks*). He climbed a tree that was overhanging the road, and sat there with his feet dangling in Jesus' face.

Now, the crowd had all been focused on Jesus. What would he do next? Would He heal a leper? Cast out a demon? Tell one of His stories? Could I tell my children and grandchildren that one day, I walked with Jesus ... maybe got His autograph?

And then their attention shifted. "*What is that fool doing in the tree? Well, look who's here! The guy who works for Rome (I say that and I spit!)*! *The traitor to our community. The poster-boy for the sin-filled heart!*" And they waited to see how the virtuous Rabbi would judge this white-collar criminal.

But Jesus takes command. And then He surprises everyone. He leans over to big burly Peter and his brother Andrew, and says, “Guys, would you help me clear the crowd a bit? I need to talk to that fella in the tree.” The disciples cut a friendly path. And Jesus stands under the branch. If Zacchaeus ever wanted to be anywhere else in his life, it would be now. If he could just shrink away from the condemnation that was coming, he’d crawl down the other side of the trunk and disappear. But Jesus has him pinned.

We don’t have much of the exchange that must have taken place. But I think He said something like, “Zac, I know you.” “You do?” “Your reputation precedes you.” “But, Lord” “Listen Zac, I’m not just hiking through town. I’ve come to see you.” “Me? ... Me?” “Yes, you ... you! I will have dinner at your place. Now, come down out of that tree, and lead on!”

The crowd was amazed, probably scandalized. They may have felt betrayed. Jesus should be their champion against the evil of this little man! He should issue the community condemnations! But He doesn’t. And Zacchaeus climbs down. Maybe he kisses Jesus on the cheek, or shakes his hand, or bumps shoulders (like our African friends do).

“I can hardly believe this Lord, but come this way!” And he leads out. Suddenly, Zacchaeus is at the head of the parade.

The group trails behind. They are confused. Humiliated. And just a bit upset with Jesus for not supporting their judgment. “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner!”

Now, to fully appreciate the confusion of this moment, we need to look at a very small word in the original language of verse 5. The word is “**must**” (dei ... in the Greek). And with it, Jesus invites Himself into Zac’s doorway. He is not just hanging around in Jericho. He **must** come to Zacchaeus!

In that country, in that time, and still even today, hospitality is not demanded. It is offered by the host, and then the guest accepts. But Jesus waded right in. “I must stay with you at your house ...” And, when Zac responds to the offer with a welcome, there is an unusual twist on everyone’s expectations!

This is a new paradigm, and it will become one of the original precursors of what we now know as **Reformed Theology**.

Paul said it in Ephesians 2, and we know it as our faith foundation -- that **God makes the first move!** That, by the work of the cross, and by the movement of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, **He invites Himself in!** He expresses the amazing gift of Grace that reaches us even before we know Him, and rescues us with redeeming love.

Or as Jesus would later say to the Church at Laodicea: “Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone opens the door to me I will come in and eat with him.” (Rev. 3:20) And we, like Zacchaeus, have the incredible opportunity to invite Him in! He has gone to be the guest of **US sinners!**

In countless ways, His Spirit calls us to the new, redeemed life. And all we have to do is welcome Him, on His own terms.

Now let’s go back to the imagination part again. What might Zacchaeus have said to Jesus?

He could have said: “Well, thanks, but you know, my home is a mess right now. I’m not really ready to receive guests. Maybe on your return trip through town”

Or -- “Hey, thanks, but I am content to just live privately. As you can see, I have already been too much in the public eye ...”

Or – “Look, Jesus, I appreciate the offer ... but this kind of hospitality could form a brand new relationship ... and it could cost me a lot ... and you might have more demands to make of me ... and frankly, I’ve seen your disciples, and I’m not too impressed. Becoming like them doesn’t appeal to me right now.”

Or perhaps -- “Look Lord, I know you are trying to be helpful ... but I do go to synagogue when I get the chance, and those reports of my so-called sins are largely over-blown. So, it’s OK with me if you just continue on down the road with your guys ... you go your way, and I’ll go mine.”

He could have said: *“Thanks Jesus, but I’m just not a joiner. I do my own thing ... have my own spirituality ... and I don’t join movements. And let’s face it, you and your disciples have a pretty well structured movement. It’s just not my style.”*

He could have said: *“Aren’t you being a little too pushy? So many evangelists are, you know. Look, I’m only just now out of the tree. Let’s just slow this all down. Lord, when I’m ready, when I think it is the right time, I’ll send you an invitation to dinner and you can RSVP. We’ll have a nice meal later.”*

There are all kinds of things he COULD have said. We know them. We’ve heard them. Maybe we have said them ourselves! But, what I think he *did* say was: **“Here I am. Let’s go!”** That’s the first half of the story. And GO they did!

Now, how do we respond to the call of Jesus? The great evangel – the good news of faith – is that, like him, we can identify our emptiness and know that something is missing. We can hear the invitation of Christ: *“I must come to your house! I am standing at your door, if you’ll open it.”* We can, and we must, make a personal commitment.

And that’s the start of the adventure. Now comes that wonderful Ephesians 2 work of divine transformation! We are *“created” in Christ Jesus for the good working of our Lord!*

Like Zacchaeus, we go forward with our Lord. We let our hearts break for the needs of others. We become the sources of courageous generosity, giving ourselves to the Lord, body and soul, with our resources, our influence, our energies, and our sacrificial engagement in His concerns.

The story of Zacchaeus is not about a temporary moment of altruism. For him, and for every disciple, it is a whole new way of living. I think he was changed forever.

So, here is OUR challenge. We are all so much like Zacchaeus. We, who once were up a tree, did not become the force that changed the world by shrinking back, by being just mildly impressed with Jesus, by remaining comfortable in our earthly blessings, or by

accommodating a culture steeped in sin and deeply in pain. That is not *our history*. It is not our calling *now*. And it cannot be our *future*, if we are to advance the causes of our Lord!

Jesus loved and transformed Zacchaeus so that He could love and transform you and me. He deployed Zacchaeus in the work of the Kingdom so that He could send us out as well. So that He could call us out from our ordinary pursuits and into the life work of blessing his world.

And let’s not miss the parallels here. He has not walked idly by our trees, or waited for invitations! I titled this message, **“Invasive Grace Changes Everything,”** because our living Lord is not satisfied to change just a few things, to stand on the fringes of our needs and wish things were better, or to watch this troubled world eat itself alive and tear itself up.

“Zacchaeus, I must come to you. Twenty-first century disciples, I must move forward with you. I’m coming to your house -- now what will you do about it?!”

Zac would pay his debts ... and give half his goods to help those in need. Of course, he could not meet every need or fill every hungry mouth. **But now, he would do whatever he could!** *So, how do we join him? What will we do?* If we dare to deeply pursue that question, God will impress ideas on our hearts. It could cost us time, and money, and energy, and the re-ordering of our lives! But, a thousand blessings could emerge!

In my church in Seattle, a group of ushers was moved to visit the four or five Saturday night homeless encampments on our church property before worship started on Sunday morning ... with cups of hot coffee.

Good friends of mine delivered Meals-on-Wheels to shut-ins.

A church I know brought fresh water to Kacha Birra, Ethiopia ... and another we all know, virtually adopted Abaya!

And then there are all those plastic bottles that have been turned into chickens.

Faithful folks are sponsoring forums about community issues ... and helping us learn how to understand and support efforts for peace on this troubled planet.

And some are working for reconciliation between divided peoples, and leading efforts to renew peace and civility and generous discourse

Then there are the dads and moms who invest in the next generations by tutoring kids, and mentoring sports teams.

And folks who visit in homes and hospitals ... bringing love, hope, and prayer where there is crisis and pain.

And the folks who caught the vision for making food available in the greatest needs through the South Sacramento Interfaith Partnership ... and so many other helping hands organizations – or just taking meals to families who are in crisis.

Of course there is the warm welcome, good food, and secure beds provided to homeless families through Family Promise.

And the folks who are taking their stand against the forces that dehumanize people ... traffic in human degradation ... and erode community values.

And the energetic saints who help to get out the vote ... and strengthen our democratic values.

And the churches and groups who lift lives by hosting all manner of AA, counseling, and support group programs.

And the daring souls who become trained to tell the Good News of Jesus' salvation, with healthy, hope-filled evangelism.

And those who are giving their time and attention to deepening discipleship through studying the scriptures with brothers and sisters ... and who pray with friends in trouble.

Or who sacrifice their time and schedules to lend a hand to a next door neighbor.

There are, indeed, a thousand invasive graces out there. And there is so much more that we can do, climbing out of our own trees to walk with our Lord! **So, what has Christ called you to take on? Is there something you should do today?**

Our brother Zacchaeus was one of the very first transformed Christian Believers to model for us an intensely visionary, active faith that could change the world.

We can still hear him speaking to Jesus: *“Listen Lord, if I have committed any sin against anyone, I’ll make it right. And wherever I can, I promise to become a generous servant in the things that you care about! Your Grace invaded me. Now I will be **the invasive grace** for someone else.”* Amen.

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The Next Step

The following questions and scriptures are provided for Life Groups and individuals who want to reflect further on today's message.

1. Read Luke 19:1-10 again. The story of Zacchaeus is well known. What strikes you here? Do you see anything new?
2. Ephesians 2:8-10 was referenced as a lens through which to read Zacchaeus' story. What stands out to you in this text?
3. Rick referred to a “Christian identity crisis that must break God's heart.” How would you advise the Christian Church to resolve this crisis?
4. Zacchaeus may have climbed that tree because the crowd around Jesus resisted letting him in. Do you see ways that the contemporary culture also hinders people from getting close to Jesus? Has the contemporary Church done this?
5. Jesus' “invasive grace” for Zacchaeus is a surprise to everyone. Have you been surprised by his welcome, or grace, for “undeserving” people? How might today's believers extend this surprise to our community?

6. A key word in the Luke 19:1-10 passage is the word “*must*.” It represents the “invasive” quality of grace. We live in a culture that values independence, individuality, and privacy – and resists intrusions in the lives or lifestyles of others. How could we engage the people with the “must” of Jesus? Can evangelism or faithful activism be too much of an intrusion? What would we be willing to risk to act with “invasive grace”?
7. Zacchaeus could have offered all kinds of excuses for not engaging with Jesus. Have we used some of these ourselves? Do we see them in the community around

- us? How do we respond to them? Do we dare?
8. Zacchaeus made a public commitment to Christ. Do we “go public” with our faith? If so, how do we do that? If not, why not?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

No matter how big or small we are ... how young or old we are ... Jesus loves us.
How do we know that Jesus loves us?
Are there ways that we can love and care for other people who Jesus loves?