

Contents

Pentecost 23, Proper 26

So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way.

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	Page
1. Lectionary Selection Luke 19:1-10	86
2. Exploring the Pattern	87
3. Reading Between the Lines	90
4. Parallel Readings	91
From:	
<i>Healing Lily</i>	
<i>Claiming Ground</i>	
<i>Ill Fares the Land</i>	
<i>The Washington Post</i>	
5. Critical Background Fred B. Craddock	93

• *Lectionary Readings (Year C)*

Revised Common Lectionary

First Reading	Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4 or Isaiah 1:10-18
Second Reading	2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12
Gospel	<i>Luke 19:1-10</i>
Psalm	119:137-144 or 32:1-7

Luke 19:1-10

1 He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus;
2 he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on
3 account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead
4 and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When
5 Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come
6 down; for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried down and was happy to
7 welcome him.

8 All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a
9 sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions,
10 Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay
11 back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this
12 house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and
13 to save the lost."

Exploring the Pattern: Themes and Motifs

1. In the gospel accounts, tax collectors are prototypical outcasts. “Roman officials contracted with local entrepreneurs to collect the prescribed indirect taxes, tolls, tariffs, and customs fees in a given area. These entrepreneurs, the ‘tax collectors,’ were required to pay the contract in advance. They would then employ others to collect the taxes with the hope that the amount collected, would yield a profit. The system, not surprisingly, was open to abuse, and Jews who collected taxes for the Romans were assumed to be dishonest and were hated by other Jews for their complicity with the Gentile oppressors” (A. Alan Culpepper in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, IX:356).

Luke tells us that this particular tax collector named Zacchaeus is a *chief tax collector* who is also *rich*.

What are some words and phrases Jews and the crowd might use to describe Zacchaeus? How might they regard his having run ahead and climbed a tree to avoid the crowd?

How do you suppose Zacchaeus would describe himself? Standing before a mirror in his comfortable Jericho home, how might he be feeling his short stature as well as his imposing position and wealth?

2. Why might Zacchaeus have any interest in *trying to see who Jesus was*? What is it that he wanted to *see* so much that he ran and climbed a tree waiting for Jesus to pass by? What do you imagine he has heard about this man now passing through Jericho? What do you suppose he is hoping to find out or discover?

Jesus calls Zacchaeus down from out of his tree and tells him he is going to stay that day at his house. Zacchaeus is *happy*. But *all who saw it began to grumble*. Recall a similar event earlier in Luke’s story:

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” (15:1)

At the Workbench: Pentecost 23, Proper 26

What does it mean to *grumble*? Close your eyes and grumble. Make a grumbling noise. What is grumbling about? What does it say without words? What do you make of the *happy* Zacchaeus and the *grumbling* crowd?

What do you suppose Zacchaeus wants to see that he may never have seen before? What does he want to observe that he has never known before? What might be a question he has to which Jesus may be the answer? What could be the yearning he has to which Jesus may speak? With all his riches, status, and security, what more might Zacchaeus want or need?

How would you describe what then happens between Jesus and Zacchaeus? What do you learn about both of these men? What does each have that the other desires or needs? What does each have to give to the other?

3. What do you know of a Zacchaeus in you who is rich in many ways, has a place in the community that is favored and comfortable, and who is known and treated with deference if not love and admiration by all? What of a Zacchaeus who would risk the embarrassment of running down the street and climbing a tree to get a glimpse of someone you don't know but whom you are determined to see?

What is your inner Zacchaeus lacking or needing? Given all he does have, what might it be that he does not have? What is the question that plagues his mind? What is the hole in his heart? What do you know of the crowd of grumblers inside you who resents and is annoyed by the persistent yearning or longing that would send you up the tree to see? What do you know in your dreams, or even in your body, of a struggle between a hopefully happy tax collector and grumbling crowd?

Exploring the Pattern: Themes and Motifs

Luke 19:1-10 • October 31, 2010

How have you known this story as part of your story over the years? As a child and teen, who did you run after and climb a tree to see? Who were your heroes, mentors, guides, and teachers—the strong and wise ones whom you wanted to see more of and be like? What did you hope they might be or do for you? What do you recall of the grumblers of that world?

4. Were you to come down from your tree and stand before Jesus, what would you say to him? What do you want him to know? And what might you long to hear him say to you in response?

What is the *salvation*—healing and deliverance—you need to make you whole? What do you long to be saved from or for? How might your life be different were you to know you are being sought? What is the lost part of you that yearns to be sought out and saved?

Who is it you need to run after? See? What is the tree you must climb?

Reading Between the Lines

The name *Zacchaeus* is the Greek version of a name based on the Hebrew word *zachach*, which means “bright, clean, or pure.” What does this add to your understanding of Zacchaeus and his relationships in his world? What tensions might he have felt in bearing such a name? What inspiration might it have given him to live differently? How might he have felt a need to “live down” his name? How do you imagine his neighbors perceived him? What might they say behind his back about “Mr. Pure”?

What do you know about someone (perhaps yourself?) acting in some way to live up to (or down to) a name they bear—a birth name, nickname, or reputation? What tensions arise between the expectations that a name raises and the life that person chooses or is forced to live?



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Jungian analyst and teacher Marie Louise Von Franz writes that climbing up a tree and down again is symbolic of psychological rebirth. The cross—the tree upon which Christ was crucified—suggests that the tree is also a symbol of spiritual rebirth. To climb a tree is to climb toward heaven. To sit in a tree is to retreat from reality, to move physically onto another plane within the material world, to gain a bird’s eye view of things—a new perspective. Perhaps Zacchaeus (who was short in stature), in climbing the sycamore, perceived the world in a new way. Perhaps he saw not only Jesus, but saw from Jesus’ viewpoint the possibility of the Kingdom of God. And perhaps, if he had a vision of this wholeness, he was able to imagine his role in bringing it about—more than imagine even, to offer himself fully to the cause.

What shortness (shortcoming or weakness) within you might be the catalyst you need to climb a tree where you might then see the world differently? What does the kingdom of God that Jesus speaks of in the Gospels look like to you? How are you right now a part of it? In what ways do you keep yourself in another kingdom? What is it like to have a foot in both kingdoms? How might you, as Zachaeus does, offer yourself fully to the vision Jesus proposes? Who will you have to admit you have cheated? What might you have to give back? What might you need to claim? What grumblers will you have to ignore?



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Parallel Readings

From *Healing Lily*

The shock of unimagined reality is the hole it tears in the past and in the future because it is the anomaly, the thing that has not happened before and is outside of the equation: *The Unaccounted*.

And that is the challenge, retreat or advance; whether the personality will expand to include the anomaly in the mental picture of the way life truly is and adjust the framework of reality to include these larger things; or, pulling back, confine itself to the smaller things that seem more tame and restrict known territory to the beaches, never to risk again to sail where there be monsters.

D. Stephenson Bond

From *Claiming Ground*

Chödrön says that things falling apart is both a testing and a healing. We think the point is to pass the test or to overcome the problem, but the truth, she says, is that things don't really get solved once and for all. Time after time, things come together and they fall apart again, like breathing.

I remember riding through the Gravel Creek drainage eight years after the Yellowstone fires of 1988 on a ten-day pack trip that led from a trailhead west of Cody, into the Park and out the south side, toward Jackson Hole. The fires had raged in this drainage, drilling a fierce heat down into the soil that sterilized it of all life. Riding through stinging rains, we found ourselves in a world fallen apart. With no vegetation to hold the soil, cliffs had slumped into creek bottoms and water had cut raw channels through the hillsides, leaving only cobble. Even then I knew what wind-blown wisps of soil would someday catch among the gravel, that live seed would be dropped from passing birds, that in my lifetime this chaos would grow back into wild-knit life. But who among us can bear to see it go without a tear?

Laura Bell

D. Stephenson Bond, *Healing Lily: A Novel of Hope*, (North Andover, MA: Alternative Views Publishing, 2010), p. 66.

Laura Bell, *Claiming Ground*, (New York: Random House, 2010), pp. 237-238.

From *Ill Fares the Land*

Something is profoundly wrong with the way we live today. For thirty years we have made a virtue out of the pursuit of material self-interest: indeed, this very pursuit now constitutes whatever remains of our sense of collective purpose. We know what things cost but have no idea what they are worth. We no longer ask of a judicial ruling or a legislative act: is it good? Is it fair? Is it just? Is it right? Will it help bring about a better society or a better world? Those used to be the political questions, even if they invited no easy answers. We must learn once again to pose them.

The materialistic and selfish quality of contemporary life is not inherent in the human condition. Much of what appears 'natural' today dates from the 1980s: the obsession with wealth creation, the cult of privatization and the private sector, the growing disparities of rich and poor. And above all, the rhetoric which accompanies these: uncritical admiration for unfettered markets, disdain for the public sector, the delusion of endless growth.

We cannot go on living like this. The little crash of 2008 was a reminder that unregulated capitalism is its own worst enemy: sooner or later it must fall prey to its own excesses and turn again to the state for rescue. But if we do no more than pick up the pieces and carry on as before, we can look forward to greater upheavals in years to come.

Tony Judt

From *The Washington Post*

"Whatever else the Gospel does—it changes your life, it heals your addictions, it cures your family brokenness—all that's wonderful, but if the Gospel isn't good news to poor people, it's not the Gospel of Jesus Christ."

Jim Wallis

Tony Judt, *Ill Fares the Land*, (New York: Penguin Group, 2010), pp. 1-2.

Sally Quinn, "On Faith" a video conversation with the Rev. Jim Wallis at washingtonpost.com, online version of *The Washington Post*, April 17, 2010.

Critical Background

From Luke

Salvation Brought to Zacchaeus

We have come so far with Luke that his stories echo in our memories previous stories. The account of Jesus and Zacchaeus in Jericho, found only in Luke, recalls the immediately preceding story of the blind beggar. Though one is very poor and the other very rich, both are blessed with salvation (18:42, 19:9, 10). The reader is also reminded of an earlier encounter between Jesus and a rich man (18:18-30), that one, however, ending sadly. Perhaps more precisely, Luke 19:1-10 recalls and almost repeats the account of Jesus and Levi (5:27-32). In both stories Jesus is dealing with a tax collector, is a guest in the publican's home, is criticized for his association with such a person, and in conclusion offers a pronouncement. A review of comments at 5:27-32 or of the article "publican" in *Harper's Bible Dictionary* will refresh one's memory about the radicality of Jesus' act toward a tax collector. That Zacchaeus was a "chief tax collector" (v.2; the term appears nowhere else in Greek literature) implicates him more deeply in the corrupt tax system of the Roman government. In a corrupt system the loftier one's position, the greater one's complicity in that system. While nothing of the private life of Zacchaeus is revealed in the story, this much we know on principle: no one can be privately righteous while participating in and profiting from a program that robs and crushes other persons. Such dichotomous thinking has been a blight on the church throughout its history, especially in those times and places in which individualism has dominated over community and the sense of being members of one another.

This is not to say that Zacchaeus is without qualities on which a disciple's life can be built. His intense desire to see Jesus, overcoming the risk of ridicule and embarrassment, is fundamental to the happy conclusion of the story. Apparently he has heard and believes that Jesus really is "a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (7:34). Whether or not he had found the personal, social, and religious price of his wealth too high, we do not know. What we do know is that he extended hospitality to Jesus, and as a result of their meeting he goes beyond the law's requirement for restitution. Voluntary restitution called for a return of the original amount plus 20 per cent (Lev. 6:5; Num 5:7); compulsory restitution called for doubling the original amount and, in some cases, repaying fourfold or fivefold (Ex. 22:1, 3-4; II Sam. 12:6). Some scholars, thinking

Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, [Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching] (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), pp. 218-220. Reprinted with permission.

At the Workbench: Pentecost 23, Proper 26

Zacchaeus' offer of half his possessions to the poor and a generous restitution to anyone he may have cheated can be seen as itself evidence of the radicality of grace and the power of Jesus' good news to him.

Zacchaeus' offer of restitution dulls the edge of radical grace and gives the impression of trying to earn forgiveness, have suggested that verse 8 may be a later addition as instruction to Christians about the meaning of the fruits of repentance. Such speculation is properly motivated theologically, but the story can be read another way. Zacchaeus' offer of half his possessions to the poor and a generous restitution to anyone he may have cheated can be seen as itself evidence of the radicality of grace and the power of Jesus' good news to him. After all, Luke's gospel of grace is joined to repentance, and repentance is not solely a transaction of the heart. Repentance bears fruit: this was made clear as early as the preaching of John the Baptist when crowds and soldiers and tax collectors came to him and asked, "What shall we do?" (3:10-14).

Luke 19:1-10 is therefore a story of salvation of a man who was rich (all things are possible with God 18:27) and a tax collector. His life-style and the resultant treatment by community and synagogue had not moved him beyond the reach of God's seeking love. He was as much a son of Abraham (v. 9) as the woman possessed of a spirit of infirmity for eighteen years was a daughter of Abraham (13:16). And if he is a child of Abraham, so are they all, including those who murmured against Jesus; and as children of Abraham they need the grace of God as much as Zacchaeus does. The words of John the Baptist return and speak as appropriately as ever: "Bear fruits that befit repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father': for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham" (3:8). That salvation came to "this house" is probably a reference to the family and servants; the concept of household salvation is an important one for Luke (Acts 10:2; 11:14; 16:15-31; 18:8). Interestingly enough, the expression "to save the lost" became widely used in the church, although "the lost" is a very rare term. It occurs here and in the parables of the sheep, the coin, and the father (15:6, 24, 32). However, the popular use of the phrase "to save the lost" has been much more narrow than in Luke. One hears it almost exclusively in terms of a conversion and often in an even more restricted sense of "preserving a soul for heaven." Here in the case of Zacchaeus, his "being saved" refers to a conversion, to be sure, but not in any private sense. Not only is his household involved but also the poor who will be beneficiaries of his conversion as well as all those people whom he may have defrauded. His salvation, therefore, has personal, domestic, social, and economic dimensions. In addition, we should not forget that in other stories "saved" is translated "made well," "healed," and "made whole." Luke would object to confining the word to a condition of the soul. The whole life is affected by Jesus' ministry, a foretaste of the complete reign of God. The closing pronouncement (v.10) makes it clear: Jesus' visit in Zacchaeus house was not a delay or detour on his journey to Jerusalem; this was and

Critical Background

Luke 19:1-10 • October 31, 2010

is the very purpose of the journey. "The Son of man came to seek and to save the lost."

Fred B. Craddock

