

Today Salvation Has Come
Rev. Nicole Farley
First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
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Luke 19:1–10

¹He entered Jericho and was passing through it. ²A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax-collector and was rich. ³He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. ⁴So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. ⁵When 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.’ ⁶So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. ⁷All who saw it began to grumble and said, ‘He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.’ ⁸Zacchaeus 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.’ ⁹Then Jesus said to him, ‘Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham.

¹⁰For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.’

On this the eve of the 499th anniversary of the start of the Reformation, which also happens to be our Stewardship Sunday, it seems right to start with one of Martin Luther’s 95 Theses. As a refresher, the 95 Theses are the 95 statements Luther posted on the doors of the Wittenberg church in an attempt to begin conversation around the Church’s sale of indulgences, a system by which priests were collecting money from churchgoers who sought to spring their loved ones and friends from purgatory more quickly. As a reformed people, we follow Luther’s lead in rejecting the premise of indulgences. And yet, it seems fitting that I start with Luther’s fifty-fourth thesis this morning: “Injury is done to the Word of God when, in the same sermon, an equal or larger amount of time is devoted to indulgences than to the Word.”¹ So, with that in mind, I’ll let the Scripture do the talking this morning!

And our Scripture today from the lectionary is the story of Zaccheus, the tax-collector. To give you some context, I turn to Professor E. Elizabeth Johnson who explains that “All tax collectors, by definition, are wealthy; they purchase the right to collect taxes and profit from what they charge above what they owe the empire.”² Zaccheus was a Jewish man who robbed his own people. And Jericho was a big place, which included a palace of

¹ Martin Luther, *95 Theses*.

² *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 4*, p. 261.

Herod's, so there were many present who were his victims. These are the same people who grumbled about Jesus, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner."

What if Jesus came through Waukesha tomorrow? And what if he went to eat with someone who, say, wasn't even Presbyterian, much less Christian? Imagine someone who lived a life which was clearly not following Christian ideals. And Jesus went to have dinner at that person's house. And then, of all the nerve, that person welcomed Jesus and began following Jesus with earnest expressions of faith, like giving away half of everything they had and righting all their wrongs!

Zaccheus was Nineveh in human form, that place which was so wayward from God's desires and to whom God sent Jonah to preach repentance. God sought to bring Nineveh back into relationship with God, and Jonah's efforts worked. Jonah, though, sat down outside the city and pouted.³ The crowd was channeling Jonah. Or maybe Zaccheus was the prodigal son and the crowd the older brother. Mightn't we also be irked if Jesus came to town and passed us by for someone seemingly "less deserving"?

Of course, the story of Zaccheus isn't meant to rile us up like Jonah or the eldest brother became. The encouragement to be found is this: if Zaccheus can demonstrate such a faithful response to seeing God in Jesus, in the form of giving generously, then we certainly can. Zaccheus not only gave back what he had wrongly taken but he **also** gave away half of his possessions. Pastor Robert Leach says Zaccheus' actions "teach us that there is always a human response to the gracious word of our Lord."⁴

As we remember those who have gone before us in faith, we naturally remember them by way of recalling their own responses to God. In Martin Luther, we remember that he loved God's body, the church, and its rightful purpose to serve people and bring them closer to their God, so much that he could not stand by as it was used to serve human greed. Abraham and Sarah set out without knowing where God would lead them, simply trusting that God would indeed lead them. Many of you began Meals on Wheels in Waukesha, and then The Caring Place. You raised children in this church, like those saints of your parents

³ Jonah 4.

⁴ *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 4*, p. 264.

may have raised you. We know that 170 years ago the Reverends Lindsley and Pratt heard a call from God to gather people to worship God in Prairieville.

And there are so many more names which maybe only you among us know, who responded to God in a way that paved the way, maybe in some way for you, maybe in some way for another. This year we remember specifically those saints in Pat Kurinsky, Bob Illing, and Al Clouse who have joined the great cloud of witnesses. That cloud is filled with those who had their own unique and uniquely human responses to the gracious Word of God. For them we give thanks.

We have them to thank, our ancestors, Martin Luther, Zaccheus, and all the rest because of God. Because God loved first. Because God sent Jonah, because God loves like the father of the prodigal son, because the “Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.” Before understanding how true this was for him, Luther was known to go to confession multiple times a day. A PBS focus on Martin Luther explains, “Mortality rates were very high and it was important to cleanse your soul as you could die at any time and meet your maker. Priests took confession from their fellow brethren and the monks took this duty very seriously. Indeed Luther, took confession so seriously he was known to leave the confessional and then go straight back in to repent further sins.”⁵

One day, however, Luther finally understood that his fate was not in his hands but in the hands of God. From this realization came the doctrine of “grace alone.” In a sermon he wrote, “Truly, then, we are saved by grace alone, without works or other merit...Notice [from John 3:16], all who believe have eternal life. That being true, believers certainly are just and holy without works. Works contribute nothing to justification. It is effected by pure grace richly poured out upon us...We receive absolution [forgiveness] and grace at no cost or labor on our part, but not without cost and labor on the part of Christ...Our salvation must exist, not in our righteousness, but...in Christ’s righteousness. ...Let his righteousness and grace, not yours, be your refuge.”⁶

⁵ http://www.pbs.org/empires/martinluther/monk_penance.html

⁶ <https://reformedreader.wordpress.com/2011/03/15/luther-on-grace-alone-sola-gratia/>

Another Luther-an, Nadia Bolz-Weber, told of her own coming to such an understanding this way. In confiding in a friend a way in which she felt like she had been a poor pastor to someone in need, her wise friend replied, “Nadia, Jesus died for our sins. Including that one.”⁷ This is an assurance of pardon if ever I heard one. So, friends, you have seen Jesus. He has sought you out and saved you from your sins, including that one, whatever it is you hold onto. Zaccheus has shown us one way of responding to the gracious Word of the Lord, to God’s salvation. How might you respond?

Let us pray: Saving God, you have found us and you have saved us. We give you our deep and humble thanks. Help us to express in our own unique and uniquely human ways our gratitude to you, we pray. Amen.

⁷ Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People* (New York: Convergent Books, 2015) p. 18.