**Coronado Community Church**

*The Lessons of Zacchaeus*

Luke 19:1-10

A message by Pastor Eric Smith

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Salvation is an important concept in faith. It’s about being saved. It’s not a destination word (someplace where you have arrived) – it’s a journey word (it’s about direction in life). A person is *saved from* something and *saved to* something else. There is movement involved… sometimes physical… sometimes spiritual… usually both.

So often in faith salvation is thought of as *the* *destination* – as in *are you saved…* Or *have you been saved?* (which translates, *have you gotten there yet*?) As though accomplishing salvation is the point. Well it’s not the point. It’s one point – but it’s not the end point – it’s a beginning.

The story of Zacchaeus has three lessons for us. They’ll show up as we go along.

As the passage begins we learn that Zacchaeus had money. Luke tells us about him … *he was a chief tax collector and he was rich.*

Tax-collectors have not been popular in any age, in Zacchaeus’ era tax collectors were an especially degraded and despised lot. They were Jews hired by the Romans. Roman oppression and military occupation of the land had occasioned long standing, simmering resentment in the Jews. The tax system was corrupt and everyone knew it. Tax collectors, who made their money by collecting the taxes from fellow Jews for the Romans, were considered scum of the earth and they were despised. That was the category assigned to Zacchaeus.

Money matters. No disagreement about that. However, as soon as we start talking about *why* it matters and *how* it matters, we’re in for lots of debate. How much is enough? What do you do with it when you’ve got a lot of it?

One wild and crazy wealthy guy, Steve Martin, said,

*"I love money. I love everything about it. I bought some pretty good stuff. Got me a $300 pair of socks. Got a fur sink. An electric dog polisher. A gasoline-powered turtleneck sweater. And, of course, I bought some dumb stuff, too."*

All of us have an intimate relationship with money. We have spent lifetimes developing our philosophy and practices of money. For some it is a narcotic, for some it is a tool, for some it is the impossible dream, for some it is of little consequence… as long as there is enough of it. Zacchaeus had enough of it – he had lots of money.

Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus. He climbed a tree so he could see Jesus as he walked by. When Jesus looked up and saw the tax collector he said,

*“Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.”*

He invited himself to Zacchaeus’ house (which was probably a really nice house)… Zacchaeus didn’t even ask… but hey…Jesus… that’s great…

*he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.*

Then what happened? Well Luke doesn’t tell us how long Jesus was there, but he does note that…

*All who saw this began to grumble and said,*

*“He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.”*

Zacchaeus had big money. Then he spent some time with Jesus – Luke doesn’t tell us what they talked about - and Zack realized he wanted something more in life. He said,

*“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.”*

***Money matters* is the first lesson** because it is the turning point in the story of Zacchaeus’ salvation.

The second lesson is that **people matter most.**

We talked about people last week.

Most of our relationships are **formed** in reaction to *either/or… black or white… good versus evil…*categorizations of others.The challenge of mature spirituality and wisdom in life is **to get beyond categorizing people.**

**Johann Wolfgang von Goethe** lived between the 18th and 19th centuries.  He is considered the greatest German literary figure of that era. He was a remarkable man – still today revered as one of the shining lights of humanity.

He wrote this,

*“If you treat a person as she appears to be, you make her worse than she is.*

*But if you treat a person as if she already were what she potentially could be,*

*you make her what she should be.”*

The trend of American spirituality in the 21st century is moving away from Christian faith. People have left or are leaving because they don’t see much that is redeeming about it. Their experience has led them to conclusions. Interestingly these conclusions are usually a form of categorization. You know… *Church …*

Goethe wrote about our calling out the best in each other.

It was what Jesus did with people continually. He did it with Zacchaeus. When we speak to the best in another person we act as God’s instrument… calling forth their *hidden or latent spirituality*. It may not be realized … yet … but when you look at people without categorizing, you can see that it’s there. And if you can’t see that it’s there no problem! Just imagine it in them… that’s good enough!

How do we call out the best in each other? How did salvation come to Zacchaeus?

Let’s step back for a moment and remember that, in big biological ways, we are very much like each other. And in big spiritual ways, we are very much like each other. But just as there are varieties of biological nuance in people – body type, skin pigmentation, hair color, eye color… so many subtleties – in that same manner *there are varieties of religious experience.*

After a lifetime of religious engagement I am not hesitant to tell you that we all have a *spiritual aspect* of our being. It’s hard-wired into us. Of course it is, God made us that way. Some may not want to use the word *spirituality*, others may refute such a notion, but that doesn’t change it. *We look for deeper meaning and connection in life.*

This is a bit of a tangent, but…

I had a sweet connecting thing happen to me on Friday. I sent out the CCC newsletter, which is whatever I have written that week. This week I wrote about Richard Alpert, also known as Ram Dass – a significant spiritual leader of our lifetimes. It went out late morning on Friday. Within minutes I got an email from Debbi Kingsbury Karabinis.

Here’s what she wrote:

*Eric, I write daily short columns for Dartmouth, and just this morning, was researching Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert. It gave me quite a jolt when I opened your weekly news 2 hours later to see you were also writing about Richard Alpert. What do you read into this?*

So I wrote back to her…

*I am rarely surprised by coincidence. Connecting and connection is way high on my list of spiritual values. And… I think God has a sense of humor. Blessings to you*

She wrote right back to me…

*Tom Warmer used to always say that.*

**William James** was the first educator to offer a psychology course in America.

He is known as the "Father of American Psychology". He wrote an important book called, The Varieties of Religious Experience.

The point of the book is its title and thesis: *the varieties of religious experience.* All people do not have the same religious experience. The lesson is that we can affirm others whose spirituality is not like our own.

Our Christian faith has historically not been so good at recognizing this. Denominations and independent congregations were, and still are, established on the premise that they have the best expression of truth… of salvation. Instead of embracing the idea that there are varieties of religious experience… nuances and subtleties of spirituality… the practice has been categorization… us and them. And over the centuries terrible consequences have taken place. Crusades… inquisitions… a holocaust…

This brings us to the third lesson of Zacchaeus… **Jesus shows the way**.

Here is what he said…

*Today salvation has come to this house…*

How is it that salvation came to that house? There were two components:

The first is that *Jesus was there.* We rightly understand that Jesus brings salvation. He is *the way.*

John’s gospel (Chapter 14) told us Jesus said, *I am the way, and the truth, and the life… no one comes to the Father but by me.*

Historically our faith has embraced that with a narrow interpretation - rather than a broader meaning. The problem has been that we made the historic *person* of Jesus the *only* way – and that was not his intent.

He is the *only* way in the sense of his spirit… his spirit and his spirituality. But not solely in the finite personhood. We’ll say more about this.

Listen to the final statement of Zacchaeus’ story…

*the* ***Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.***

The Son of Man is what Jesus called himself. It was his self-designation of his own fully actualized human spirit. The universal spiritual human being. Paul will later call it *the spirit of Christ.* Jesus called himself the Son of Man – but he never said, and wouldn’t say, that he was the only one. His hope was like Goethe’s… that we would *all* learn and live into the expansive spirituality of Sons and Daughters of Humanity. He said he would return, and he was talking about this spirit – the Son of Man – and this return has taken place over and over again.

He is absolutely, in this sense, the Way, the Truth and the Life.

So … now there is the second component of how salvation came to Zacchaeus house.

It was Zacchaeus. The rich, tax collecting, short of stature, tree climbing unique individual that he was. Salvation came to his house because Zacchaeus had a profound realization, that *people matter most.*

Thus his salvation began…

*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.*

You don’t have to give half of your possessions to the poor - unless that expresses the realization of salvation in your life, too. You have your own salvation to express… and it is uniquely yours.

You are a child of God – unique in spirituality. And where and how you follow *the way the truth* and *the life* of the Son of Man is your unique spiritual quest amidst the varieties of religious experience.

No one else knows how that will manifest for you because there is no template for your life.

Your salvation is a marker on your journey in ever deeper fellowship with God.