

**Circle of Mercy – Sermon by Guy Sayles**  
**Sunday, October 30, 2016**  
**Freed to Remember Who We Are**  
**Luke 19:1-10**

As a boy, I learned that Zacchaeus was short and that he climbed trees. I learned these things from a song: Zacchaeus was a wee little man/and a wee little man was he./He climbed up a sycamore tree/for the Lord he wanted to see/the Lord he wanted to see.”

Since I was short and climbing the apple trees in my grandparents’ yard was one of my favorite things to do, I thought I’d like Zacchaeus.

Most people didn’t like him very much, because he was rich a tax collector. Israel was occupied and oppressed by the Roman Empire, and tax collectors like Zacchaeus betrayed their own people by collaborating with Rome. They took money from their own people, from their brothers and sisters in God’s covenant with Israel, pocketed some for themselves, and passed the rest on to their oppressors.

Tax collectors like Zacchaeus were reverse Robin Hoods; they robbed the poor for the sake of the rich, including themselves. Zacchaeus wasn’t just a tax collector; he was a *chief* tax collector. He’d climbed higher in the bureaucracy than he climbed in the sycamore tree.

Like anyone else who climbs the ladder in a system, he was more responsible than lower-level workers were for the damage it to the poor and vulnerable. But, because he’d been in the system for awhile and because he depended on it for his lifestyle, he no longer saw, heard, or felt the impact of his greed on others.

He’d labored so long in the oppressors’ house that he no longer knew where his true home was, and he couldn’t remember who he most deeply and truly was: a child of Abraham and a child of God.

For good reasons, the people of Israel despised tax collectors; but Jesus made reaching-out to them a high-priority. Jesus loved the tax collectors, just as he loved everyone who felt far away from God: the riff-raff, the marginalized, the ashamed, and the guilty. He opened his arms and heart to the tax collectors and called these questionable characters to join the community of his followers.

His welcome of such traitors annoyed many religious leaders. Jesus dealt constantly with the carping criticism of people who were so good that they could hardly stand it and so good no one else could stand it either.

Zacchaeus had heard how Jesus welcomed people like him. He’d also heard that Jesus was on his way through town. He was determined to see Jesus. A lot of other people wanted to see Jesus, too, and almost all of them were taller than this wee little man. He ran ahead of the Jesus and of the crowd and “climbed up in the sycamore tree for the

Lord he wanted to see, the Lord he wanted to see.” And Jesus said: “Zacchaeus, you come down, for I’m going to your house today, I’m going to your house today.”

Actually, Jesus said to Zacchaeus: “*Hurry*, and come down; for I *must* stay at your house today.’ So he *hurried* down and was *happy* to welcome him.”

That little phrase—“he was happy to welcome him”—encapsulates a story I wish we knew more about. Jesus went into Zacchaeus’ house, left his sandals at the door, washed his feet, sat at Zacchaeus’ table, prayed the blessing, and then broke bread, drank wine, and talked with Zacchaeus in a way that reminded him of who he was.

I imagine that they laughed and cried, laughed until they cried, and cried until they laughed again because Jesus said that joy is always the right response when a lost one comes home. Or when real home comes into a lost one’s house.

When Jesus came to Zacchaeus’ house, salvation came. Acceptance crossed the threshold; wholeness moved in; justice rearranged the living room; compassion took a seat at the table; forgiveness told stories that Zacchaeus hadn’t heard since Sabbath School.

I imagine that Jesus told Zacchaeus, truthfully but tenderly, that his job was hurting him in ways he couldn’t see and hurting the poor in ways he’d chosen, long ago, to ignore. He described to him that he was living on the sweat and tears of other people.

And he told Zacchaeus that some things were about to change. The changes were essential but, even more, they were now possible. Salvation inevitably generates signs of its presence. Acceptance energizes transformation. Forgiveness fuels gratitude. Mercy energizes repentance.

The order matters. Jesus went to Zacchaeus’ house and made it a home, before Zacchaeus’ did anything other than welcome him. Grace always comes first, then our grateful response to it.

Reclaiming the priority of grace was part of what the Reformation, which we celebrate this weekend, was all about. Grace means salvation comes to our houses, to our lives, while they’re in desperate need of rehab.

*Grace* is the word for God’s breathtaking generosity and for those things God does for us that we cannot do for ourselves. God gives us the priceless gift of life itself. We did not have to be; we did not will ourselves into existence; and we cannot sustain ourselves. We didn’t manufacture the earth on which we stand, the air we breathe, the water we drink, or the food we eat. We didn’t give ourselves the minds with which we think or generate the talents and gifts with which we make a place for ourselves in the world. Life itself is gift.

We don’t produce, purchase, or earn grace. We can either resist grace or receive it, but we cannot generate it or deserve it. For some of us, grace is hard to take. We know too

much about ourselves and not enough about God's love. Although we try to hide it from ourselves and from everyone else, we know that we have made a wreck out of our inner lives:

the anger that seethes just beneath the surface and erupts onto the people we love most

the bitterness which gnaws away at our happiness

the compulsions which chain us

the envy that turns friends into competitors

the regret over what we've done and failed to do—the people we have hurt and used, neglected and overlooked

the shame over what we have become and failed to become

Grace is another chance after we have blown all our chances, a new start at the end of the road, the embrace which welcomes us home after we have betrayed everything home stands for, and dawn after the darkest night of the soul. Grace is Jesus, flesh and blood proof that God is with us, not remote from us and for us, not against us.

The Sufi poet Hafiz advised:

Just sit there right now  
Don't do a thing.  
Just rest.  
For your separation from God  
From love  
Is the hardest work  
In this  
world (Hafiz, p. 183)

Don't do a thing, because there's nothing you have to do; *nothing* you have to do; nothing *you* have to do; nothing you have to *do*. Rest from the separation from God and from love. Grace bridges the distance and heals the separation.

Grace went to Zacchaeus house and made it home. It freed Zacchaeus to remember who he was: a child of Abraham and Sara, a child of God.

When Jesus and Zacchaeus appeared together on the front porch after supper, Zacchaeus announced to the people who were still clucking their tongues about Jesus eating with yet another sinner: "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."

It's a remarkable pledge. Remarkable because the law of Moses (Lev 6:5, Numbers 5:7) required that voluntary restitution be the original amount plus 20%, so the restitution Zacchaeus pledged was extravagant beyond requirement. And, his pledge is remarkable because he promised that half of all his wealth would be for the poor.

Wealthy people then, and now, have trouble being so generous. According to Ken Stern, writing [in the April 2013 edition of] *The Atlantic*:

In 2011, the wealthiest Americans—those earning in the top 20%—contributed on average 1.3% of their income to charity. By comparison, Americans at the base of the income pyramid—those in the bottom 20%—donated 3.2% of their income. . .

In a series of controlled experiments, lower income people who identified themselves as being on a relatively low social rung were consistently more generous with limited goods than upper class participants were. Notably, when both groups were exposed to a sympathy-eliciting video on child poverty, the compassion of the wealthier group, began to rise and the groups' willingness to help others became almost identical (74-75).

As you already know, willingness to help those in need comes from being exposed to them—to seeing them as people, not problems, as neighbors not nuisances, as children of God with hopes and dreams, not as statistics.

Nora Gallagher wrote of the change that came over her as a result of her working in a soup kitchen and getting to know the people she served—their stories, their fears, and their hopes. She said: "I remember thinking as I worked in the soup kitchen that I didn't want to know what I was learning. Because then my life couldn't go on in the same way as it had before: driving around in my nice red Volvo, thinking about what new linens to buy. What we learn we cannot unlearn," she says. "What we see, we cannot unsee." (*The Sacred Meal*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 22.)

At the table with Jesus, Zacchaeus had his eyes, ears, and heart opened. Signs of salvation flowed from him: extravagant restitution for those he'd wronged and compassionate generosity to the poor and needy.

When Jesus comes to our houses and make them homes, when he convinces us that we are God's beloved daughters and sons, our lives will be different. Not all at once, but surely and steadily, our lives will be less about us and more about God and other people. There will be signs—evidence—that Jesus is remaking your life.

Jesus will show up in how we talk, how we listen, how we earn and spend our money, what we do with our time, where we invest our energy, how we use our gifts and talents, how we treat the vulnerable and how we honor our own vulnerability.

There's no workbook or formula for these signs of salvation. All I know is that, in one way or another, they will all be signs of radical love.

Here's what we get to do, have to do: welcome Jesus into our lives, into this day, this moment. At the table, we listen, talk, and remember who we are: God's cherished child. You are God's daughter, God's son. God loves you with an everlasting love. Day by day, moment by moment, Jesus helps us remember, and we walk with him into the world, to do what he does and to become who he is and more of who we are.