

“More than a Wee Bit of Faith”

"Zacchaeus was a wee little man,
And a wee little man was he.
He climbed up in a sycamore tree
For the Lord he wanted to see.

And as the Savior passed that way
He looked up in the tree and he said,
'Zacchaeus you come down,
For I'm going to your house today!
For I'm going to your house today!

Zacchaeus was a wee little man,
But a happy man was he.
For he had seen the Lord that day
And a happy man was he;
And a very happy man was he.”

I imagine many of you are familiar with this song about Zacchaeus. You might have learned it in Sunday School or at church camp. It is a cute song and sort of has that ear worm quality, that once it gets in your head it is hard to get it out (kind of like “Baby Shark”). It tells some of the parts of the Zacchaeus story, but not the whole story.

It tells of Zacchaeus’ difficulty seeing Jesus because there was such a large crowd. It relates that Zacchaeus climbs a tree to get a better look at Jesus. Then Jesus calls him to come down and requests to have a meal at his home that night. However, what the song leaves out is the crux of this pericope. That is what happens between Zacchaeus’ descent from the tree and Jesus and Zacchaeus heading off to his home for supper. In just those couple of verses we learn some significant things about Jesus, his ministry, and how people are called to participate in his ministry.

To most clearly point out the importance of what is going on in this story I am going to take us all back to school days and English class. One of the most common types of essays we had to write in English class was a compare and contrast essay. It was a fundamental type of writing assignment that helped us to read carefully and critically. It also helped us learn how to write clearly and make convincing arguments. Since practicing the fundamentals is important I want to use them here.

The stories we are going to compare and contrast are this one about Zacchaeus and one from earlier in Luke about the rich you man.¹ You have Zacchaeus’ story in front of you, we will rely on our memories about the “Rich Young Man.”

¹ Luke 18:18-30

First of all, the rich young man encountered Jesus by actually approaching him, whereas Zacchaeus did not seem to have that confidence and instead was more of an onlooker who just wanted to catch a glimpse of Jesus.

Second, the young man when questioned by Jesus about his faith life tells Jesus that he keeps all of the commandments. Whereas, we learn that Zacchaeus is a tax collector. Tax collectors were not considered righteous by their neighbors. But most importantly they worked for the Roman oppressor collecting taxes to pay for the army that was occupying the land of the Jews. The tax collectors made their living by overcharging on taxes and taking that extra for themselves. The crowd's grumbling about Zacchaeus suggests that he was known for taking quite a bit extra. Indeed, Zacchaeus seems to have become a rich man off of this tax collecting.

Third, Jesus is impressed with the Rich Young Man's life of faith but tells him there is one thing left for him to do. He must sell his possessions give the proceeds to the poor and follow Jesus. The Rich Young Man goes away sad for he was very rich. In contrast, Jesus says nothing to Zacchaeus about eternal life of giving up his possessions. But when Zacchaeus hears the grumbling he offers to give half of all he owns to the poor and to pay back anyone he has cheated fourfold.

The Rich Young Man's encounter with Jesus leaves him despondent because he is wealthy. Whereas Zacchaeus he offers to give away his possessions and make restitution. The Rich Young Man's longer encounter with Jesus does not seem to have a transformative effect, but Zacchaeus' trivial encounter makes him a new man.

Perhaps Zacchaeus's passion to see Jesus was more than curiosity and more than trying to justify himself. The Rich Young Man seemed more interested in being affirmed in his actions and less willing to hear what might be required of him. Initially the Rich Young Man appears to be the better of the two men, but it is Zacchaeus who is open to Jesus' message. It is Zacchaeus who seems to intuit what is required of him, and he does it without a second thought.

Luke wants us to compare and contrast these stories. Luke wants us to see that it is not simply keeping the commandments that is important. It is being transformed by the commandments and by our encounters with Jesus that we change who we are and how we act. When we are transformed by Jesus' love we become more like the person God calls us to be. Not perfect, perhaps not even new and improved, but fundamentally changed from the inside out. Thus we embrace each other as Jesus does with care, compassion, and, most importantly, love. Love for each other no matter our faults and failures. Love that transcends earthly labels and bounds to embrace the essential in each other just as God does with unconditional love.