



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

June 26, 2016 - Luke 19:1-10

"American Idol" (Encounters With Jesus Series)

The Rev. Dr. Tim Shaw

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

8 Zacchaeus 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." **9** Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. **10** For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.

When, in the last few weeks or months, have you experienced a moment of grace in your life? When have you felt God's presence or been so aware of God's goodness or experienced a gift that you didn't expect and were flooded with a sense of gratitude? Has there been a moment recently when you were

just very aware of the goodness of life, when you saw so clearly that all of life is a gift? Sometimes those gifts of grace come flooding into our lives. And there are other times that the awareness of God's love and mercy, the awareness of the persistence of His grace shows up right in the middle of a season of great pain, great uncertainty and even tremendous loss.

There are certain moments in our lives when this awareness of God's grace, this simple recognition of God's unmerited favor, is so crystal clear. Sometimes it's just the simple ordinary things in life that happen, that make us realize the sacredness of the moment we're in. Often these moments are totally unexpected. They catch us by surprise.

That's what happens in the story I just read. God's grace unexpectedly lands in the life of a man by the name of Zacchaeus. His life is turned right side up; his life is completely transformed; he is set free from something that has gripped his life for a very long time. And the liberation takes place because of an experience of grace.

Anyone who reads this story has to wonder, "What in the world was Zacchaeus doing up in that tree? What was going on in his heart and mind that drove him to climb a tree? That's sort of a weird

thing for a grown man to do. Kids climb trees. Climbing trees is fun but powerful, grown men don't usually shinny up trees. What was he doing in that sycamore tree? The text tells us that he was kind of a short dude and that might be part of the reason he decided to climb that tree—but I think there is more going on.

Zack was a super wealthy guy. He was the chief tax collector in Jericho, and Jericho was one of the richest cities in Israel. Jericho stood at a very important crossroads. It was a center of commerce and power in the Roman Empire. It was a magnificent, beautiful, cosmopolitan city. Caravans, carrying goods from all around the Roman Empire, came through Jericho either going east or west. And every one of those caravans had to stop and pay taxes.

Zack was the chief tax collector for this wealthy region. In fact, he led a team of other tax collectors. He was a big deal. This was a significant government post. To have that job probably meant he was an educated, intelligent man. He had a lot of power. He had a ton of cash and he had a lot of influence.

That's why it's surprising that he climbs up a tree to see Jesus. I bet in that day it would be pretty humiliating for a mover and shaker like Zack to climb a tree.

It would be super odd to see Bill Gates climb a tree to watch the Rose Parade. Rich people can pay other people to climb trees for them.

Something drove Zack up that tree. What was it? Obviously, no one knows for sure all the reasons why he climbs that tree but it seems likely he was in search of something that all his wealth and power could not give him. He was restless, maybe feeling pretty empty inside. Zack was wealthy in things, power, and money. But he was poor in the things of God and poverty stricken when it came to relationships. Even though he could surround himself with all the things that money could buy, he was isolated and cut off from his community.

As the text says, he was a tax collector but not just a rank and file taxman. He was the chief tax collector in one of the wealthiest parts of Israel. Being a tax collector in Israel under Roman occupation was NOT like being an IRS agent. At the time, Israel was an occupied nation ruled by the Romans. Zacchaeus worked for Israel's overlords. He was a sell-out, a traitor, a collaborator.

The Romans used a specific strategy to seize the wealth of the nations they conquered and they brought that money back to Rome where it would benefit their citizens. The only people who lived in luxury and comfort in Israel were the Romans, and people like Zacchaeus who were their collaborators.

Tax collectors such as Zacchaeus were given a green light to charge way more than what they had to ultimately pay to Rome. They extorted money from the people and they became some of the wealthiest people in the country

and also the most hated. They were like Nazi collaborators in Paris during World War II.

The people of Jericho watched as Zacchaeus grew richer and richer. They watched as his house became more lavish. And as they watched him grow wealthy, they knew it was their money that was making all of that possible and there was nothing they could do to stop it. The tax collectors had the Roman military behind them.

What in the world would motivate a person to betray his own people like that? What would motivate a person like Zacchaeus to sell out to the Romans knowing that he would be hated, that he and his family would be ostracized from their own community? The answer is quite simple. It was the idolatry of money that drove him to do it.

An idol is anything, good or bad, that we put at the center of our lives in the hope that our lives will be more secure. When we take a good thing and make it into an ultimate thing in our lives, we turn it into an idol.

Jesus once said, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for a person's life does not consist in the abundance of their possessions." The difficulty many of us face when it comes to the idolatry of money is that our possessions, our incomes can become a part of our core identity.

Zack's life was controlled by the money idol and for years he was probably blind to how he was being controlled and diminished by the idolatry of money. Here's one of the reasons it is so easy for us to be blind to the reality of this idol in our own lives. I know this is the way it can work in my life. We don't compare ourselves to the rest

of the world. We compare ourselves to the other people in our economic bracket and there are always people in our economic bracket who have, or seem to have, more money that we do. What we then tend to do is look at our own lives and say something like, "Well, at least I don't live an extravagant life like that guy over there." When we make that comparison we remain blind to how money is controlling our lives.

The idolatry of money hides itself deep in our lives. It turns us into servants of money. We sell out to the counterfeit god of money. We look to money for our ultimate security, for our sense of accomplishment, our sense of significance. And this counterfeit god makes its demands on us and we obey. If we live for money we've become its slave and it is a cruel taskmaster. When money takes over our hearts we become blind to what it's doing to us. Money controls us through our anxieties and ultimately demands that we put it first.

Zack is a study in contrasts. Super rich, yet incredibly poor. A man with tons and tons of power, yet lonely. Zacchaeus was rich in the things of this world—money, influence, material possessions but he was poor in eternal things. The most important things in life, the only things that last beyond this life, are relationships—a relationship with God and relationships with people. Zack seems to have had neither.

Maybe it was a desire to be accepted, to be forgiven that drove Zack up that tree. Maybe by this time in his life Zack realized that he been climbing the ladder of success only to find that the ladder was leaning against the wrong wall.

He got to the top of that ladder and realized that it did not lead to where he had hoped it would.

So, why does he climb that tree? Well, I think just maybe he's looking for something different. Sure, it was also a way to avoid taking a couple of elbows to the chest from people in the crowd lining the street. But I think Zack was desperate to see Jesus, the friend of tax collectors and sinners. He didn't care that people would laugh at him, a grown man up in a tree. He didn't care. His curiosity and desperation drove him up into that sycamore tree. I think he was beginning to entertain the possibility that since Jesus had Matthew, a former tax collector in his band of disciples, maybe, just maybe, Jesus would even accept him.

Why a sycamore-fig tree? Well, that tree had large, broad leaves on many spreading, lateral branches. It would be a great place for Zack to hide. Could it be that Zack wanted to see Jesus but was not too sure about Jesus seeing him? He could club high into the tree and out on one of the branches and hide behind those big, broad leaves. He could get a look at Jesus from a safe distance but not get to caught up in all that Jesus stuff.

Have you ever known anybody like that? They're kind of interested in God, but a little skeptical, maybe even a little anxious about this whole God thing. Maybe they're concerned that they're going to have to check their brains at the door to put their faith in Jesus. Maybe they want to keep this Jesus stuff safely out of reach because they've been down that road before and got hurt by people in the church. Maybe they've known Christians who are hypocrites or attended a church that seemed so small minded. Maybe they were cornered by some Bible-

thumping believer who seemed more concerned about winning an argument than listening and showing the love of Christ. They're just not sure about this whole God business so they remain a spectator. Zack may have felt some or all of these things and yet he is attracted to Jesus. So, Zack thought he had the perfect hiding place... but Jesus ruined all that.

As Jesus came into town, the streets were lined with lots of average citizens of Israel who probably thought they were more faithful Israelites than guys like Zacchaeus and they were probably right. But Jesus doesn't stop to talk to any of them. He stops and looks up and talks to the man in the tree.

But Jesus has more in mind that a conversation in the middle of the street. Jesus invites himself over to Zacchaeus' house and the people are stunned. They grumble and say, "He's gone to eat with a sinner." But like Zacchaeus, Jesus didn't care what the people thought of him.

I want you to pay close attention to this. It wasn't Zacchaeus who asked Jesus into his life that day it was Jesus who invited Zacchaeus into His. "I'm coming home with you today Zacchaeus!" Jesus has a claim on all our lives. In that startling statement we can hear and see the essence of the gospel. "Zacchaeus, I'm coming home with you today." Jesus looked beyond what everyone else saw in Zacchaeus. He looked through the layers of extortion and greed. Jesus had spent a lot of time with tax collectors. He knew that there was a deep, deep sickness in their hearts and he knew that he had the cure.

Everyone is shocked—everyone, including Zacchaeus. In

that moment the hated, ostracized tax collector began to understand grace. God's salvation was not something he needed to achieve by being virtuous. It was a sheer gift of mercy. That glimmer of understanding exploded in Zacchaeus' heart and in his life. He welcomed Jesus into his house with joy.

Zacchaeus says to Jesus, "Yes! Come into my house." And then something remarkable happened that show us that Zack understood the connection between grace, gratitude and generosity. And what he will probably come to understand is that living a generous life will open up a world filled with even more grace. Look at what Zack says and does.

Verse 8: Zacchaeus 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." 9 Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. 10 For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Zacchaeus' life was changed over dinner when he met Jesus Christ. It wasn't just a change in attitude, it was a revolution in his priorities. Zacchaeus was ready to do something radical. He knew he wanted to follow Jesus and he knew that would mean he'd have to make some significant changes in his life and a lot of those changes would have to do with his love of money. So on the spot he makes a commitment to give away 50% of his income, which was way beyond the 10% that was commanded of every Israelite by the Law of Moses.

That act of generosity shows that he was beginning to understand that salvation, HIS salvation was a gift of love given to him freely by God. It wasn't something he would ever be able to earn. It was a gift and so his heart erupted in an act of spontaneous generosity. Since salvation was not a function of keeping the Law, Zack would go far beyond what the Law required and give half of his possessions away. That is an idol-slaying act. And if we want to hobble the idol of money in our lives, if we want to know this kind of liberation, then give some of your money away.

Jesus finds us, even when we're hiding. Here we see an example of the Great Shepherd searching for and finding His lost sheep. God finds us...we don't find God. God comes right into our hiding places. What do you think Jesus and Zack talked about that night? Do you think Jesus stood on Zack's porch and lectured him about the things he had done wrong in his life? Do you think Jesus confronted Zack with all the poor people he had ripped off? Do you think Jesus lectured him about the Law?

I don't think so. I think Jesus probably did a lot of listening that night. I think Zack was well aware of all that he had done wrong. He was well acquainted with the total mess he had made of his life. So, Jesus listened, Jesus accepted, Jesus loved this man that few others would love. Jesus offered forgiveness and a new start. Jesus offered Zack His love, His mercy, His grace and that transformed Zack's life. This is what happens when grace takes hold in someone's life, when someone feels accepted by God, when God finds them.

Grace transforms us. God's grace transforms Zack's greed into generosity.

Grace took a selfish, self-consumed man and liberated him to live a life of greater selflessness. God's grace changed him from a person who lived with his fists clenched, holding on to everything he thought was his, into someone who lived with hands open, generously giving to others.

Zack said, "I will give 50% of all I have to the poor." The Old Testament had laws regarding retribution. Zack's act went way beyond what was required. And he did this not out of duty but because gratitude overwhelmed his heart. What we see Zack doing is a picture of radical generosity that is flowing from a grateful person.

Karl Barth, one of the great 20th century theologians once said that, "Grace and gratitude belong together like heaven and earth, Grace evokes gratitude like the voice of an echo. Gratitude follows grace as thunder follows lightning." It just does.

When we experience God's grace we can't help but be grateful. When we have been on the receiving end of God's generosity, we can't help but be generous. It's like lightning and thunder.

So we go back to the question I asked at the beginning. Have we experienced the grace of God? Are we aware of God's goodness today. Do we know his generosity in our lives? Do we know that all of life is a gift from God? Are we rich in the things of God? Have we experienced the love of Christ through other believers, felt their support through the difficult things in life, shared in the joy of celebrating the goodness of life?

To deal with the idolatry of money, is a cardiac repair process. We need a revolution of the heart. When we give some of our treasure away our hearts will be transformed. When we experience the grace of God, gratitude and generosity is what follows. And as we're generous, we experience even greater grace.

So, what about you and me? Do we want to make a stronger connection between our experience of God's grace and a life of growing gratitude and generosity? Do we want to weaken, do we want to hobble the idol of money in our lives?

We give because we realize that we have been given so much. We give when we realize how wealthy we are in the things that really matter. We give because we are grateful.

Jesus replaced money as Zacchaeus' savior. Now that Zack's identity and his security were rooted in Christ he realized that he had more money than he really needed, so he gave lots of it away. It was the grace of God that transformed what was at the center of his life. The idol of money was replaced by the gracious, strong, steady presence of Jesus Christ. And Jesus can do that for us as well.

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Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting: fpchkoolau@gmail.com