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June 28, 2026
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Pastor Amy Vigesaa

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Grace and peace to you from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

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There is a man in my neighborhood who has a reputation. I have yet to meet anyone who is happy he lives on our street. Some have even given him nicknames that I'm not going to repeat. There is a lot of grumbling. Some of the ridicule and criticism he has earned- the police have been to his house multiple times. His yard and garage are full of things he's accumulated with seemingly no purpose- it's an eyesore. There are various people who come and go at odd hours of the day making us wonder what actually goes on over there. And yet, every now and then, I look out my window and wonder if there's more to the story; more to his story. If there's something we don't know. Maybe we shouldn't create a story about him, but we do.

Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector. According to Jewish Theologian and New Testament scholar Amy Jill Levine, "The tax collector is the agent of Rome and not the agent of God…presumed to be corrupt…despised by the people in his town. [He is] likely dishonest, likely to overcharge the population. He likely showed no mercy to others." This is what people thought of Zacchaeus, because

tax collectors had a reputation. But what if that's not who Zacchaeus actually was? What if the crowd assumed this was his identity because they simply didn't like tax collectors and didn't like who they worked for? Have you ever been judged by others because of assumptions they made about you? Have you ever felt the undeserved grumble and slurs of others?

I want to read you another translation of this text because it highlights a discrepancy that changes the meaning of our story. This is from the Common English Bible, verses 5-8:

When Jesus came to that spot, he looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, come down at once. I must stay in your home today." 6 So Zacchaeus came down at once, happy to welcome Jesus.

7 Everyone who saw this grumbled, saying, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."

8 Zacchaeus stopped and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord, I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone, I repay them four times as much."

Did you hear it? There is an academic argument around whether Zacchaeus will give and will pay, or if this is already his practice. There is enough support for the latter that I would like us to consider that Zacchaeus wasn't your typical tax collector. When salvation comes in the presence of Jesus, it unravels these assumptions of the crowd; it unravels the presumed identity and vocation of Zacchaeus in the community. And I think we sometimes need our assumptions about other people unraveled as well, so community can be restored.

Zacchaeus' name means "innocent" or "clean" and Jesus recognized this identity and called him a son of Abraham. Now was Zacchaeus squeaky clean? Probably not- we all sin- but he established practices in his life to keep from becoming corrupt; to keep from becoming the tax collector they all took him for. I've heard it said that every sin has a remedy- and the remedy for greed is generosity. If a person struggles with greed, the best way out is to learn to give away the wealth. And Zacchaeus does. He gives away half of what he owns to the poor. Half! Can you imagine giving away half of what you own? Zacchaeus was a wealthy man, so maybe that didn't hurt too much. Maya Angelou is quoted as saying, "No one has ever become poor from giving." Zacchaeus also promised to pay back four times the amount if he ever defrauded anyone. That is the strictest law of restitution- Old Testament law only required one and a half times. He chose four! Zacchaeus held himself to account. He decided to counter the potential for greed in his life. He put guard rails up to be sure of equity and integrity. Zacchaeus was the agent of God he was meant to be through his generosity and redistribution of his wealth. Either the crowd didn't know this, or they were unable to see him beyond his connection with the Roman Empire. Understandable – many were hurt by the Roman Empire, it was often oppressive and violent. Maybe Zacchaeus was complicit in a corrupt system; guilty by association. Perhaps we can be too. Maybe Zacchaeus was a good man caught in a bad system. At any rate, I'm guessing we do the same thing the crowd did- grumble, label, categorize, generalize- so that no goodness can be seen in an individual.

I think we do this a lot, unfortunately. We don't necessarily mean to, we simply haven't worked on not doing it. Many of us haven't done the work to combat our bias, to counter our sin, to transform our thinking. This month is Pride month, and this weekend is the Pride festival, where those identifying with the LGBTQ community and their allies celebrate and support one another. Have you ever assumed anything about that group? Ever generalized? Ever made judgments without knowing a single person of that population? How about refugees or immigrants? How about men? Women? Republicans? Democrats? Alcoholics? Teenagers? The elderly? You get the picture. We are so good at making judgements on entire people groups that we can't see the goodness or even the potential for goodness in some. We are especially adept at this when we think a person is aligned with Empire, when we believe them to be part of the problem- complicit to the oppression, the inequity, the corruption and harmful policies.

But Jesus saw him. Jesus came and stood under the sycamore tree, looked up and called to Zacchaeus. In the act of Jesus seeing Zacchaeus, the crowd was forced to see him too. The crowd was a captive audience to the words that would come from Zacchaeus about his practice of generosity and reparations. The question is, would they also recognize him as a Son of Abraham? Including him in the community would be a big change. Seeing him as Jesus saw him, as he truly was, would take transformation. Scripture doesn't tell us if they accept him- it doesn't say what happened next. Perhaps it's so we will wonder if we would. Would we be able to change our view? Would our understanding of that person unravel and be recreated by Jesus? Would we allow lies to be unraveled

and truth to stand in its place? Would we allow their story to be woven together with ours?

Maybe we need to put some practices in place for ourselves. When we find ourselves assuming things about other people; generalizing, labeling, categorizing- let's stop. Right there, stop and consider if we know it to be true in that moment with that person. Let's educate ourselves, learn about the other, set aside our preconceived notions. Let's practice seeing, really seeing each other like Jesus sees. Valerie Kaur, activist and founder of the "Revolutionary Love" movement, shares a piece of wisdom from her culture. She encourages us to look upon each other like this, "You are a piece of me I do not yet know." She adamantly affirms that "Starting from a place of wonder, the world begins to change: It is a practice that can transform a relationship, a community, a culture, even a nation." Maybe wonder is the unraveling force we need. Maybe seeing like Jesus will help us imagine a new way of being together. Maybe holding ourselves to account, countering the potential for sin and judgment and complacency, will begin some healing in our communities and world. Maybe we shouldn't create our own stories about people. The old stories will come unraveled and new ones will be written, woven together with our own. Salvation has come, for he too is a son of Abraham. Salvation has come, for they too are a child of God. Salvation has come, for you too are a child of God.

Amen