

October 30, 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time: Luke 19:1-10

by [Willie Dwayne Francois III](#) in the [October 12, 2016](#) issue

As a Jew who works for Rome, Zacchaeus lives at the intersection of riches and loneliness.

Tax collectors were good at doing bad. Every man in the empire had to pay taxes, and someone had to do the dirty work. The great wealth that tax collectors accrued, however, was through corruption and the exploitation of others. They lived and thrived at the expense of their own people, and this arrangement existed within a social context: an imperial occupation that preyed on Hebrew identity and prosperity.

Sometimes the victims of such a context can create victims of their own, victims of their victimization. “What happens to you won’t destroy you,” said Howard Thurman, “unless you allow it to get in you.” When what transpires around us takes root within us, it can give birth to the worst of our practices. The world can program us to unsee the value in ourselves and others.

Zacchaeus is an extension of the empire, complicit in his own oppression. In order to survive the injustice around him and avoid the poverty of his time and place, he joins the colonizing project to control his people. He accepts what is available to him and normalizes the injustice it embodies. His daily life is reduced to symptoms of the sickness of his society.

If we are not careful, we mirror and perpetuate the pain in our world. The normalization of our social context can create the impulse to prey on other people. You see this, for example, when economic policies and systems squeeze and suffocate people who live in pockets of violence, poverty, failed schools, and drugs. Some of them will destroy their own people in the name of survival. This cuts against the myth of “black-on-black crime” as it is typically invoked, as a rhetorical device to propagate the idea of innate black criminality. (Most violence is intraracial, in whatever community.) The finger points instead at the system’s logic, a logic that dehumanizes and demonizes both blackness and poverty.

Jesus offers Zacchaeus a way out—a route beyond the ruins of his past, a chance to live outside the system of predatory pragmatism in which he is entrenched. Salvation comes to Zacchaeus’s house—after Jesus finds this unlikely candidate for liberation on the limb of a sycamore tree, calls him down, and invites himself to his home. For us as well, Jesus offers a new way to be alive, alert, and available to each other. We all need this gift of reimagining life beyond everything that deadens, corrupts, and paralyzes.

Zacchaeus’s name can be translated as *Justice*. Being a tax collector makes it hard for him to live up to this name. But when he encounters Jesus, he has the chance to live up to it despite the conflict presented by his context. Justice meets Jesus. There is something revolutionarily organic about such a meeting. The meeting of Jesus and Justice undergirded the abolitionist movement and birthed the civil rights movement. It shaped the resolve of Harriet Tubman, expanded the vision of Booker T. Washington, grounded the ministry of Henry McNeal Turner, and propelled the witness of Ida B. Wells-Barnett.

To prove himself, Zacchaeus declares that he will abandon the resources that fortify his identity as a wealthy tax collector. He says this in the present tense: “I give to the poor” and “I give back fourfold.” (This use of the present tense is lost in some English translations.) He is changed already, articulating not a future promise but something that has already begun. He even exceeds the law of restitution by indicating his repayment of four times what he extorted from his victims. When you embrace your divine identity, you are defined beyond your inventory, infractions, and insecurities.

Authentic grace is not the power to purchase. It is the stamina for sacrifice. Jesus offers Zacchaeus a way to shift the narrative of his life. Zacchaeus responds by creating a new story, a counternarrative to the berating of the shortsighted crowd. There are moments in life when God gives you the opportunity to go public with your transformation. God gives you a chance to stand your ground.

Zacchaeus testifies about a change of conduct and an evolution of ethics. Jesus’ response highlights the evocative truth that you cannot hold a person hostage to a category that person has outgrown. This is one of the underappreciated poetics of life: we have the capacity to grow beyond yesterday, to outlive it. Zacchaeus and Jesus teach us that human beings can be *evolutionaries*—always becoming. We don’t have to allow our lives to be packaged in the small boxes people present to us.

We can stand on our growth, rather than internalizing the blindness of those who cannot see our worth beyond our misdeeds of yesterday.

Zacchaeus and the savior—Justice and Jesus—teach us that we can outgrow the tentacles of social trauma, unlearn the lessons of oppression, and exorcise our latent demons. We have the grace for growth. Salvation is knocking on our front door.