

A tale of two rich folks

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As a lectionary preacher, I've journeyed through the Gospel of Luke for over 25 years. But this year I noticed something new. Luke places the story of two rich folks in close textual proximity; in chapter 18, a rich official remains nameless; in chapter 19, we meet a chief tax collector named Zacchaeus. And in between? The two stories are divided by Luke's account of Jesus healing a blind beggar.

Notice the way Luke identifies the respective responses of these two wealthy individuals to seeing Jesus. The rich ruler asks Jesus how he can strengthen his religious credentials. When Jesus tells him that the very thing he desires—eternal life—will be his if he sells all he owes and gives the proceeds to the poor to free himself for following Jesus, the rich official is terribly sad and unable to surrender his wealth.

The disciples are shocked to hear Jesus say, "How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God. For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." Jesus then meets a blind beggar, and the man simply cries, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus tells the man his faith has made him well, and the beggar does what the rich official would not; he follows Jesus, glorifies God and stirs those around him to rejoice.

This time around I've paid more attention to the rich ruler and the blind beggar before looking at the story of Zacchaeus. My bias was already against Zacchaeus, since he is wealthy, powerful and not at all opposed to using heavy-handed business tactics to capitalize on the vulnerabilities of common folks. Despite any sentimental fondness for this story ("Zacchaeus was a wee little man ..."), most of us know that he represents a class of folks who deserve God's strong displeasure.

But note Zacchaeus's response when Jesus looks him up, calls him by name and invites himself to dinner. In Zacchaeus, unlike in the rich ruler, there is suddenly great joy because Jesus has summoned him to come down, thus celebrating the recovery of another lost sinner for the kingdom.

Few stories in the Gospels show us a more thorough and life-changing conversion that goes "all the way down." Few demonstrate a spirit as generous as this wealthy tax collector when he is surprised by joy. He scrambles down from his vantage point to join Jesus, joyfully invites him into his home, happily confesses his less-than-stellar business practices, pledges a full half of his earnings to the poor and promises to repay—fourfold—damages to those he has cheated.

David Ford and Daniel Hardy have said that a kind of moralizing stoicism or joylessness characterizes many Christian communities these days (*Living in Praise: Worshipping and Knowing God*). Although identified with good ethical living and morality, stoicism takes the joy and delight out of knowing God and loving his goodness. Ford and Hardy suggest that in our prophetic denunciations of the great evils of our time we'd be better off if we pay more attention to the God of joy.