

I

When I was in middle school, I learned that the lunchroom is a distinct social ecosystem unto itself, and whom you choose to sit with, or you choose not to sit with, is a subject that is closely observed and evaluated by your peers.

I was fortunate. I've always been a big guy - I grew nine inches between the sixth and eighth grades alone, so no one ever really messed with me too much. I was also an athlete, so within the school's social ecosystem, I carried enough capital that navigating those lunchroom boundaries wasn't too tough for me.

But I was sure to navigate them carefully, because though the boundaries may not have been drawn out with tape on the floor, they were still plain enough for everyone with eyes to see and ears to hear, and woe to you if you crossed one of those invisible lines.

II

If you're a young person listening this morning, I'd like to tell you that these social dynamics get better as you get older, and they do, to a certain extent. As people mature and come into their own sense of themselves, I think we gradually stop worrying so much about what everyone else thinks of us.

But I'd be lying to you if I told you that those lunchroom dynamics completely go away once you graduate from high school. The boundaries between those who are deemed "in" and those who are deemed "out" are perhaps

a bit more fluid and less brightly defined in adulthood, but they're still there nonetheless, and we all navigate them in our everyday lives, and we all know that there is still a price to be paid if you are judged to have strayed too far out of your lane.

And to me, that's one of the compelling and confounding things about Jesus. He keeps exposing and then breaking those invisible, powerful boundaries. In fact, that's one of the things that ends up getting him betrayed, arrested, and eventually crucified.

III

This winter and spring, we've been reading and preaching our way through the Gospel of Luke. A few weeks ago, we read that Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem," and so for the past few weeks, we've been following along as Jesus preaches and teaches on his way from Galilee to Jerusalem and all that awaits him there.

And when we come to our story for this morning, the road trip is almost complete. Jesus has come to the ancient city of Jericho, only about 15 miles from Jerusalem as the crow flies.

In the city of Jericho, Jesus will meet a man named Zacchaeus, whom we are told is the chief tax collector for the city.

In those days, the entire Mediterranean basin was ruled by the Roman Empire, and the Romans basically had two standing orders for all

the territory under their control: Keep the peace by any means necessary and keep the tax revenues rolling into Rome.

To collect the taxes, the Romans employed local officials as their tax collectors, and the unwritten agreement between the Empire and their tax collectors was that as long as the correct amount of taxes came into Rome on time, whatever the tax collectors collected from their countrymen over and above that amount, so be it. Obviously, the system was designed to be ripe for fraud, and in many parts of the Roman Empire, the chief tax collector was the most hated man in town, because he was thought to have often colluded with the Empire to enrich himself on the backs of his hardworking neighbors.

So Jesus entered the city of Jericho, where he was about to meet the chief tax collector, a man by the name of Zacchaeus.

And so now I invite you to listen for a Word from God from Luke 19:1-10.

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. 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." So he hurried down and

was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said, to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions I am giving to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost."

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

Within the social ecosystem of Jericho, Zacchaeus was the *chief* tax collector. Strike one.

Compared to his peers, he was short. Strike two.

And he was rich.

As we've been reading our way through Luke, we know that generally speaking, the rich do not fare well in the stories. Zacchaeus was rich. Strike three.

If you've ever sat in a school lunchroom, you know that if you're trying to look cool, you should never look like you're in a hurry. You want to be easygoing and self-confident in your movements.

But poor Zacchaeus really wanted to get a look at Jesus, and when he couldn't see over the heads of everyone else, he took off running to get ahead of the crowd. And then, as if it wasn't

enough that the richest, most hated man in town was *running*, he shimmied up a sycamore tree. How undignified and unbecoming for a man of his obvious means!

But then Jesus saw Zacchaeus, and the whole scene changed.

“Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.”

And those who were whispering and giggling about Zacchaeus weren't giggling anymore. They were scandalized because accepting hospitality was and is a big deal. To push the metaphor a bit more, Jesus just walked all the way across the lunchroom to the most hated kid in school and said, “I'm coming to hang out at your house today, let's go.”

And so the people began to grumble about Jesus going to be the guest of one who they have deemed to be on the “outside,” and if you've been following along in Luke, you know that this isn't the first time such a charge has been leveled at Jesus.

But before Jesus can respond, it's Zacchaeus who stands up for himself. He says, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I am giving to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.”

Some English translations present Zacchaeus's statement as an intent for future action. They render it, “Half my possessions I will give to the poor.”

But the verb tense in the original language of the text is in the present active voice. The implication of this tense is that the action being described is in presently occurring.

Sometimes, translation issues don't really make a big difference one way or the other. But this one does, and I think it holds the key for how we read and interpret this whole story.

I think Zacchaeus knew that he was the most hated man in town, the same way that kid who has to sit by themselves in the lunchroom usually knows that they're at the bottom of the social pecking order.

I don't think this is a story about a corrupt man repenting of his sins and promising restitution. I think this is a story about a man who was on the outside, who was despised, who was cast out, who was hated, and Jesus breaking down all of those invisible boundaries to lift him up a true son of Abraham.

I think Zacchaeus was the most hated man in his community simply because he was rich. But there's nothing in the text to suggest that Zacchaeus was crooked in his tax collecting or unfaithful or unrighteous in his handling of money.

When Zacchaeus said that he was giving half of his possessions to the poor, I think he was telling Jesus the truth. I think Zacchaeus was serious when he told Jesus that if he had defrauded anyone, he would pay back four times as much. And it's telling that

no one in the crowd listening in on the conversation stepped forward to collect on his pledge.

And so once again, here is the theme of reversal showing up in Luke's gospel. The one who was the most hated man in town is the one who gets to have Jesus over for dinner. The one who was despised by the children of Jericho is the one who is called a Son of Abraham by the Son of God.

Most of the time in Luke's gospel, rich people don't come off too well. But I think the story of Zacchaeus serves as the exception to the rule. Because the truth is that money is amoral – it has no moral compass of its own. Money like a brick. One brick can be combined with other bricks to build a home, or a hospital, or a school, or a house of worship. But the bricks themselves have no morality of their own.

But even so, those same bricks can be used to break a window or knock someone on the head. Those very same bricks can create violence and bring destruction. But again, it's not the bricks themselves that do the destroying. Money and bricks have no morality of their own – it's what happens to the bricks or the money when it comes in contact with our hands that tells the tale.

I think Zacchaeus was despised in his community because he was rich and because he worked in a job that was often associated with corruption. But there's nothing in the text to suggest that Zacchaeus was anything but upright and righteous in his handling of money.

IV

My friend, you and I both know that there is quite a bit of toxic teaching in our world today when it comes to issues of money, power, wealth, and possessions. You and I both know that even in our culture, there's often an automatic assumption that someone who has wealth must be corrupt, even if they regularly give half of their money away.

So let me be perfectly clear. There is nothing in the world wrong with having some money. Having money doesn't make you corrupt or evil or unwelcome in the household of God.

However, there is everything in the world wrong with your money having you.

In the chapter just before the one we read today, another rich man asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. And Jesus tells him he only lacks one thing, and he should sell everything he has, give the money to the poor, and then come and follow him. And Luke tells us he went away from Jesus shocked and grieving, for he had many possessions.

There is nothing in the world wrong with having some money, my friend. But there is everything in the world wrong with your money having you.

And this I have come to believe in my heart of hearts, my friend. God doesn't want your money. God doesn't need your money. God is the alpha and

the omega, the beginning and the end, the creator of all that is, seen and unseen. The earth is the Lord's, and all that is therein, the world and those that live in it, says the Psalmist. God doesn't want or need your money.

What God wants is not 10 percent of your income, or a love offering, or a piece of your stimulus check. What God wants can't be bought or sold at any price. What God wants is your heart - and how you steward the money God has entrusted to you is often a direct reflection of its orientation.

Zacchaeus never let his money affect the orientation of his heart. Zacchaeus was more interested in seeing Jesus than he was in his riches or social standing. And that's why Jesus lifts him up, the most hated man in Jericho, as a true son of Abraham.

V

And so as we think together about what it means to be the church in the 21st century world, we must be mindful that Jesus keeps right on crossing those invisible but powerful barriers that the world draws around people. Jesus keeps turning upside down our understandings about who is "in" and who is "out." Jesus keeps challenging our assumptions about money and wealth and power and privilege.

And so I wonder, if 21st century Athens, Georgia, was a big school lunchroom, where would Jesus sit? According to Luke, he'd go sit with those in our community who are hated and

despised, the ones everyone whispers and grumbles about. He'd go sit with the ones who have been told that they're unworthy, that they don't count, that they should go back to wherever it is they came from, that they don't belong.

And then he'd turn around and look over his shoulder at his church, and say, "Remember who and whose you are. You are my body. You are my ambassadors. You are my treasured possession in all the earth. As I cross this room with every eye on me, come follow me, because I have come to seek out and to save the lost."

Thanks be to God. Amen.