

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
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October 30, 2016  
*31<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time*  
Luke 19:1-9

### ***Always Reforming***

On the calendar of many Protestant churches, including our own, today is Reformation Sunday. The day commemorates the start of an era which began on October 31, 1517. One year from tomorrow will mark the 500-year anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation.

The date marks the occasion that Martin Luther purportedly tacked his 95 theses protesting practices of the Church to the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenburg, Germany. Because of this movement he is credited with starting, the Roman Catholic Church was divided, and so today we have Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Congregational, Pentecostal, Independent, Evangelical, you name it Christian churches. We are inheritors of that Protestant, reforming tradition.

Perhaps you heard this week that Pope Francis is helping to kick off this year of celebrating the Reformation. And maybe that comes as a surprise to you. For in my lifetime, Reformation Sundays often included a bit of self-congratulations. We patted ourselves on the back for being the holier, truer-to-Christ church, the "anti-Catholic" Church. And my Catholic friends have told me that in their Catholic schools, they were instructed that theirs was the one true church.

Ecumenical relations have come a long way in the last 50 years. Condemnation of one another now seems antiquated, and smug superiority unChristian. For while we can take pride in our heritage of being Reformed, it's also a good thing to always be reforming.

So today we have Zaccheus to remind us of our need for ongoing reformation. I invite you to "climb a tree" with me for a fresh perspective on his life, and on ours.

You heard the wonderful story a few minutes ago. Zaccheus, whose name derives from the Hebrew word for "pure," is anything but pure. He is a wealthy chief tax collector, also known as a publican, whose wealth was surely gained by bilking the common people. He had a government contract to collect taxes, which gave him every opportunity to add more to what was due and line his own pockets. Publicans also were moneylenders, speculators, and contractors who supplied the Roman army. With every transaction, there was money to be made. Do what it takes to make money, even if it involves fraud. Publicans were at the top of the food chain when it came to financial gain, and at the bottom of popularity polls among common folk.

Imagine the recently deposed CEO of Wells Fargo Bank trying to budge into a line for World Series tickets. "Do you know who that is?" the crowd would whisper. "He's one of those guys who robbed the rest of us, and when he and his cronies were caught, got away with a pittance of a penalty." That's the position Zaccheus was in, in the rear of an unsympathetic crowd, trying to catch a glimpse of the itinerant teacher and healer named Jesus. Now, it may be that all these centuries later, there's a bit of a warm spot in our hearts for the short man, Zaccheus. But there was no love lost between the crowd and this greedy little shyster. He knew no one would make room for him, so he had to find a place for himself. And though it was a bit embarrassing for a grown man, especially a grown and rich man, to hitch up his robe and run, and though it was even more humiliating for a grown man to climb a tree and sit in its limbs, that's what he did. For he wanted to see Jesus.

Do you wonder what motivated Zaccheus? Was he lonely, looking for a friend? Had he reached a point in his life when he realized that money wasn't enough? Was he starting to regret the underside

of his vocation? The text doesn't tell us. Instead, it startles us, as Jesus startled the crowd, and looks at Zaccheus beyond the labels he wears, to see him as a human being with needs and possibilities and a heart yearning to be touched.

So Jesus sees Zaccheus, and calls him down from the tree. Over the centuries, this has often been seen as a picture of Christ's call to every sinner. "I'm coming to your house today," he says. Imagine the reaction of the crowd. Why, of all people, does he choose Zaccheus? Doesn't he know what a scoundrel, what a sinner that man is? Of all people, he's the least deserving. What is Jesus' motivation? They'll have to pay attention, because Jesus will tell them soon enough: the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost.

So it is that in the house, Zaccheus announces his reformation. Accepting Christ's call means a change in our earthly life, a resetting of priorities, righting of wrongs, a fresh start with ethical implications. "I'm giving half of what I own to the poor. And I'll pay back what I took by fraud four times over!" Surely this is an occasion for celebration, a party at Zaccheus' house, the kind of eating and drinking for which Jesus was well known and often criticized. Surely there are other sinners there, too. Surely they all celebrate, for another lost soul is found, a sinner repents, and Jesus proclaims, "Today, salvation has come to this house."

The story of Zaccheus tells the story of our salvation, the gospel in one man's life. The gospel of Luke is especially concerned with what we do with our money, how our relationship to wealth affects our discipleship. In other places in Luke, there's not a lot of hope for a rich person. Jesus tells the rich young ruler to give away everything he owns and come, follow him—and the rich young ruler goes away sad, because he has many riches. Zaccheus is the happy alternative ending to that story. Jesus says it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to go to heaven. But with God, all things are possible, and Zaccheus is the camel who passes through the needle. He becomes skinny enough to do the impossible by divesting himself of riches. And then there is the story of the Pharisee praying in the Temple. "God, I thank you that I am not like that tax collector over there," while the tax collector prays, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." Jesus pronounces the tax collector justified, because "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." Zaccheus is the penitent tax collector.

Zaccheus tells the gospel story in more ways. He's also the blind man on the side of the road who gains his sight, because like that blind man, he wanted to see Jesus, and because Jesus saw him, he did. He's the prodigal son who is welcomed home, as he welcomes Jesus into his home and the guest becomes the host. He's the lost coin now found, he's the lost sheep back in the fold, he's the reason for celebrating. And as they celebrate, Jesus tells everyone that Zaccheus, the tax collector, is a son of Abraham. For God blessed Abraham and made him rich, so that he could be a blessing to others. Zaccheus is part of the family, reconciled and restored, blessed to be a blessing. In Jesus' presence and in his words, and in Zaccheus' joyful response, the kingdom of God has arrived. This is what salvation looks like.

This truly is one of those Bible stories which invites us into its center to listen and learn, and then goes with us as we emerge from it back into our world. Do you hear its call to repentance, to welcome Jesus into your heart and home and know the joy of salvation? Do you hear its challenge to ethical business practices, to justice and community and sharing? Is it reminding you that our relationship to money can interfere with our relationship with God, that Christ calls us to hold worldly

possessions loosely so that we are free to hold God and others more closely? Does this story give you hope that God's kingdom really can be present with us and among us now?

All of these truths are present in this little story, but let me suggest one more which could be especially pertinent for us in this election season. It has to do with the labels Zaccheus wore and the way he was being treated by the crowd. True, he had earned the scorn of others. True, he had made the pursuit of wealth a higher priority than social justice. But it's not true that he was the least deserving of all to meet Jesus. It's not true that he was a sinner and everyone else was a saint. In this election season, we have been bombarded with polarizing speech and dehumanizing labels pinned to opposition candidates. Contenders have become enemies, and the anger and hatred have infected us all. We are stressed and fatigued and we have been encouraged to despise the opposition candidates.

Can we be more like Jesus, and see a soul in need of salvation in each and every candidate? Can we be more like Jesus, and live beyond the labels we use to excuse our hatred? Could we actually learn to love our enemies, and welcome them into God's kingdom even if we fiercely disagree with their politics?

Now that would be a reformation movement!

It starts in our hearts, the acknowledgment that we too are sinners in need of salvation. It grows as we accept God's grace and mercy, and reform our inward thoughts and outward behaviors. Our reformation is a lifelong process, always reforming, so that the image of Christ becomes more and more evident in us and the world begins to say, "Today, salvation has come to this house."

May we repent of any smugness, any name calling, any exclusion of another sinner—and choose instead to join the party with Jesus. May his peace be with us all.