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Luke 19: 1-10

Prayer: Dear Lord, Help us to understand your word despite the great distance in time and geography from which we hear it. Help us to store it in our minds, in our hearts, in our souls. In the name of the one who spoke it, Amen.

In Our House

Every year about this time, we start to get queries about the holidays. What can people give Triune for the holidays?

What is the one thing people can do to impact homelessness?

What can a church collect for us? Bam, bam, bam.

I wish I could honestly say: Blue jeans. Or Advil. Or alarm clocks. Or blankets. Or peanut butter. That's what will end homelessness.

But I don't think those things are going to have the slightest impact on homelessness or poverty or addiction or anything else. And so I invite people to join us, to meet people, to enter a conversation. And then I watch their eyes glaze over.

They don't want a change of life. They want to know how to help in an hour or two.

They're not bad people. Far from it. But they just want to do their part for the holidays and move on.

They don't want to think about the pregnant woman on the street. She's got way too many problems.

They don't want to think about the person with schizophrenia. That can't be fixed!

They don't want to think about the crack addict who is throwing his life away. Too dangerous.

Nonetheless, we encourage them to join us for worship, and then to eat lunch with us. Because we are convinced that the first step to any kind of meaningful help is to meet those you want to help. To come into our house and see the people who live here. To look in their eyes.

Where'd we get an idea like that? From that radical Jesus. For if he didn't invite people into his house, he sure invited himself into theirs.

Last week, we talked about the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector who went into the temple to pray – and about how surprising that parable would

have sounded to Luke's audience. Jesus wasn't a bit impressed with the good guy, but the repentant sinner? That's whom he favored.

Now Luke introduces another tax collector. And if the widow and orphan are shorthand for the vulnerable in ancient society, "tax collector" is shorthand for *ultimate sinner*.

Please turn in your Bibles to **Luke 19: 1-10**, and let's meet him.

(Jesus) entered Jericho and was passing through it. ²A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax-collector and was rich. ³He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature.

⁴So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way.

⁵When 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.'

⁶So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.

⁷All who saw it began to grumble and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.'

⁸Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, 'Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.'

⁹Then Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.'

Last week, I compared a first-century tax collector to today's predatory lender. Well, who is that?

It's someone who lends money in such a way that he is preying on someone more vulnerable. Typically, the interest rate is 10, 20 or even 50 times more than the going rate at a bank or credit union. I got an email just this week from a partner pastor, asking how he could get someone out of a high-interest loan.

Predatory lenders prey on desperate people with bad credit who can't get money from conventional lenders. They may take a car title as collateral, so when the person can't pay, he forfeits his car. They may loan out \$300 but before the person can turn around, he owes \$400 or \$500, with no end in sight.

Last week, I rewrote the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, using the example of Ivan, an Internet predator who scammed a mentally challenged woman.

I took that story directly from a family I had worked with. I don't know Ivan's real name, but I know he had convinced a woman to clean out her savings account, pawn her jewelry, borrow against her retirement and wire him the money.

But as her family was untangling the mess, what upset them most was the discovery of two loans the woman had taken out – one at 85 % interest, one at 158% interest. The other money was simply lost. But these loans were going to roll over and accrue interest and cause all sorts of future problems.

The Bible has no use for this kind of behavior. All through the Old Testament, the Jews are told not to charge interest to each other. Leviticus and Deuteronomy set up elaborate systems whereby borrowers who've gotten in over their heads are not forever evicted from their land.

Care for the widow, the orphan, the sojourner. That theme runs throughout the Old Testament. *Don't prey on them.*

And so it's no surprise that when we get to the New Testament, the foremost example of sinner emerges as ... the financial predator.

A financial predator like wee little Zacchaeus.

Like the United States, the Roman Empire was financed by a system of taxes – poll taxes, road taxes, bridge taxes, sales taxes, property taxes. But rather than

create a bloated bureaucracy and a tax code that no one could decipher, the Roman Empire gave some wealthy and powerful people jurisdiction over a certain area to collect the taxes.

These people then appointed chief tax collectors from among the population. The chief tax collectors hired local tax collectors to actually take in the money.

So in Jewish territory, the chief tax collector and the local tax collectors were Jews working for Rome.

But here's the difference between the Roman system, and our IRS: The Roman system was set up to allow extra taxes to be collected above the amount sent to the government. That was the collectors' payoff.

Corruption was an accepted part of the system. As a result, the tax collectors were despised on many levels.

- 1) They were ceremonially unclean because they dealt with Roman Gentiles.
- 2) They were seen as traitors by their fellow Jews.
- 3) They were understood to be part of the financially oppressive Roman Empire who got rich on the backs of their fellow Jews.

Such a man was wee little Zacchaeus.

Zacchaeus was not only a tax collector, but a *chief* tax collector. He had the authority to send soldiers to ransack people's houses in order to generate more income. He was highly placed in a corrupt, harmful system.

And in this extraordinary story, Jesus didn't call Zacchaeus out for his considerable sins of social injustice. *Jesus invited himself to Zacchaeus' house.*

Luke is driving home the point that this Jesus, this Savior, is going out of his way, to befriend a financial predator, a wrong-doing tax collector. A really big sinner. Like the predatory lender whose neck I could cheerfully wring.

“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 to save the lost.”

You know, it's one thing to welcome those who have been marginalized through no fault of their own: The blind. The leprous. The woman who bled. The boy with seizures. The paralyzed. We see these people throughout the gospels.

It is another thing entirely to welcome those who have, by their own hand, harmed others.

And yet, Luke clearly portrays Jesus as a Savior who welcomes both. No, more than *welcomes*. Who actively *seeks* both.

He actively seeks even those who have harmed others.

So far, this story is all about grace, the grace extended by Jesus to Zacchaeus. But then we come to the second part that is equally important: Zacchaeus' response.

Zacchaeus welcomes Jesus to his home, but here is the key: He repents. He makes restitution. He offers to give half of his fortune to the poor. And to those he cheated, he will pay four times the amount he took.

That four-fold restitution comes from the Old Testament. And it's about as high as Jewish law demanded. But giving half his wealth to the poor was not required. It was an act of repentance, a generous act of repentance.

Some theologians are bothered by this repentance part of the story. They think it somehow mars the notion of grace, of Jesus' radical grace to a corrupt, rich man.

But I don't think so. I think repentance has to be part of the equation. Repentance has to be our answer to grace. Repentance has to be our response.

The Kairos Document was issued in South Africa in 1986 by theologians opposed to apartheid. Listen to what they said:

“The Biblical teaching on reconciliation and forgiveness makes it quite clear that nobody can be forgiven and reconciled with God unless she or he repents of their sins. Nor are we expected to forgive the unrepentant sinner. When he or she

repents, we must be willing to forgive seventy times seven times, but before that we are expected to preach repentance to those who sin against us or against anyone.”

So forgive when there’s repentance. Otherwise, speak out against the wrongdoing.

Which brings me back to the holidays here in our house. We are not helping someone in addiction by giving him blankets and coats and a heater and a bicycle to make his life easier. What we’re doing is allowing the addiction to continue.

We are not helping someone who won’t work by giving him clothes and shampoo and toiletries. What we’re doing is creating dependency, entitlement and undermining dignity.

The mingling of different socioeconomic levels is what we hang our hat on here. But with that comes responsibility. We are not to create perpetual victims. And so those living in ways that they know – and we know – are not of the Lord need to repent. They need to change.

Stealing bicycles. Stealing clothes. Stealing tents. Stealing money and food stamps and IDs. Cutting people. Drinking and smoking until there’s brain damage. There is no way these activities are honorable to the Lord.

Jesus went to Zacchaeus' house, and Zacchaeus responded by making amends to those he had cheated. It doesn't come much clearer than that.

Jesus has come into our house. And we must make amends, whether we are rich and corrupt ... or poor and corrupt.

The third part of the story is that, once again, those who saw Jesus extend a hand to the sinner Zacchaeus **“began to grumble and said, ‘He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.’ ”**

But as he'd done in so many stories before, Jesus brushed the grumblers aside. **“For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”**

Jesus made it clear in story after story after story that he came not to pat the good on the back, but to offer the bad like Zacchaeus a way to salvation.

Back in chapter 5 of Luke's gospel, Jesus called the tax collector Levi – or Matthew -- to be a disciple. Matthew threw a huge banquet in his house and invited his tax collector friends to meet his new boss.

The Pharisees and scribes complained then, too. **“Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?”** they demanded.

And Jesus answered, **“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.”** (Luke 5: 27-32)

I think we’ve understood that message of welcome at Triune. I think we’ve internalized it. I think we live it.

The part where we fall down is demanding repentance. For we sinners – whether we be rich and corrupt, or poor and corrupt – must change if we are to enter the kingdom of God.

We once put a man out of Triune for stealing supplies from the art room. A woman then took him into her apartment for awhile. When she finally put him out, he left his coat. She wouldn’t respond to his phone calls when he wanted it back.

So he emailed me to say that his exclusion from Triune was “senseless, logically unacceptable and contradictory.” *P.S. – I’m not making this up – would I call the woman and get his coat back?*

No remorse. No repentance. Not to mention, a little clueless about the level of my patience.

He just wanted me to enable his bad behavior for awhile longer.

I told him that he had created the situation, and he needed to fix it.

The grace that led Jesus to invite himself into the home of a chief tax collector is at the center of our faith. The very identity of our savior is one who provides us a gracious way to enter relationship with our God despite the sinfulness that has come before.

However, we have the responsibility to accept that grace.

It is called repentance.

Amen.