

Sunday of Zacchaeus 2006: Aunt Gertrude's Five Dollar Bill

A sermon by the Rev. Fr. David G. Subu
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Luke 19:1-10

¹Then Jesus entered and passed through Jericho. ²Now behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus who was a chief tax collector, and he was rich. ³And he sought to see who Jesus was, but could not because of the crowd, for he was of short stature. ⁴So he ran ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see Him, for He was going to pass that way. ⁵And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and saw him, and said to him, "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for today I must stay at your house." ⁶So he made haste and came down, and received Him joyfully. ⁷But when they saw it, they all complained, saying, "He has gone to be a guest with a man who is a sinner." ⁸Then Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold." ⁹And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham; ¹⁰"for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen. Christ is among us!

Today is Zacchaeus Sunday, named for the tax collector in the Gospel of St. Luke that is read. This marks the closing of the reading cycle before the beginning of Great Lent. It also is the Gospel passage read at the time of a blessing of a new home, and is referred to in the prayer of annual house blessings as well: "O God our Savior, the true light who willed to be baptized by John in the Jordan to renew our human race by the bath of rebirth... who deigned to enter the home of Zacchaeus and thus brought salvation to him and all his house...." This story of Zacchaeus therefore teaches us about what it means to truly have our homes blessed, and how we ourselves are renewed and reborn by the blessing of the Lord.

We know that Zacchaeus was a tax collector and that he was very rich. That basically means that he was corrupt. He charged more than was allowed him and kept

more than he should for himself. He was despised by his fellow Jews, an anathema who represented everything that was wrong with the Roman Imperium. When Christ came to town Zacchaeus wondered at what was happening, why the crowds were gathering. As far as we know, he may have known nothing about Jesus of Nazareth or His preaching. He just wondered at what the fuss was all about. Nevertheless, in a perhaps very impulsive manner, he climbed into the Sycamore tree to see who Jesus was. That impulse would change his life forever.

Jesus say Zacchaeus in that tree and in accordance with His own wisdom that defies the wisdom of this world He called out and said, “Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for today I must stay at your house.” This word from the unknown teacher must have caught all of them by surprise. The Gospel says, Zacchaeus hastened down the tree. [Have you ever tried to “hasten” down a tree!] The man whom the whole town feared and despised as a racketeer and extortionist was the one whom Jesus wanted to be with. So they murmured, “He has gone to be the guest with a man who is a sinner.” No doubt many thought, “Ah, this preacher is no one special. He is only interested in money. So he goes to curry favor with the rich man.” The City of Jericho was used to false prophets. Similar types had lived in that area since the time of Elijah and Elisha.

But something that only God could have foreseen changed at that moment in Zacchaeus. Perhaps he was tired of being outcast and wished to finally feel like one of his own people. Perhaps he was impulsively proud and wanted to show off his wealth. Perhaps he was just so unaccustomed to being treated like a human being that the sudden kindness and candor of Jesus caught him off guard. Whatever his motivation, he was

inspired to react to the word of God. He said, “Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold.”

Now, the Gospel says Zacchaeus was very rich. So giving away half of his wealth might not have bankrupted him. It may not have affected his standard of living. But when he added that he would return anything he had falsely gathered at 400% interest so to speak, he was surely setting himself to ruin. Most of his wealth would have come by false accusation. The life of an honest tax collector in the Roman Imperium was, contrary to our image today, extraordinarily difficult. The pressure of the government on the collectors was immense and they rarely could escape the temptation to overcharge and to skim. But Zacchaeus not only survived but prospered at the expense of others. So his change of heart meant a real change of lifestyle. And all because of a kind word from a stranger named Jesus.

There was a young man I knew in college who in his freshman year wrote many letters to friends and family, perhaps out of homesickness. One relative was his Great-Aunt Gertrude. He had only met Gertrude once as a child but every year at Christmas Aunt Gertrude was sure to send him a card and inside of it, a fresh, crisp, clean and brand new five dollar bill. There’s nothing quite like a brand new bill. It is untouched and unsullied by the world. It speaks of promise and potential. Gifts like these teach children how to love money from an early age, don’t they?! Back in the 1970’s a five dollar bill for a kid could do you well. But this young man saved those bills in his bank and eventually could go to college. So he decided to write his Aunt Gertrude a nice letter telling her all that he had been up to and what he hoped to accomplish in school and how much he thanked her for her unsolicited kindness all those years.

After about a month he received a letter from his cousin, Gertrude's daughter. She said how nice the letter was and how nice it was for him to send it. Unfortunately, Great Aunt Gertrude wasn't really able to respond to the letter anymore. She was suffering from dementia or Alzheimer's or something similar and no longer really knew he all the family members were. "But thank you so much for thinking of her. I am sure she would be very proud." At that moment all the money in the world could not have bought and would not have been worth what that young man desired most of all—the ability to speak with his aunt and to hear a word from her. But it was never to be. In that instant, he learned the limits of wealth.

The Psalms say, "The fear of the Lord is pure, lasting forever; the judgments of the Lord are true, righteous, every one, more desirable than gold, even than the finest gold; his words are sweeter than honey, even the honey that drips from the comb." Zacchaeus learned the truth of that. He realized that the Word of God was more desirable than gold, sweeter than honey. He came to understand what it meant for the Lord to enter into his house, for him to be blessed, for him to be renewed and reborn. Thus said the lord, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham; ¹⁰"for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost." May the same great God and Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ, enter into our lives, and find us, and save us. Amen.