

11.15.09

You Matter to God

Luke 19:1-10

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Who knows the title of the official song of the state of Georgia? *Georgia On My Mind* by Ray Charles. You can tell a lot about a person by what is on his or her mind. If we could put on the screen what was on Jesus' mind, I think the picture would be filled with **people**. For Jesus, people were a priority. Jesus had people on his mind. We see this in the gospels including today's passage.

"Jesus 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, Lord, I give 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 to save the lost."**

At one time or another many of us question whether our existence makes much of a difference at all. Especially when times are tough and we feel isolated or alone, we may doubt God's existence or question how God can care about each individual, including me. Lost in the crowd of more than 6 billion people on this violent, needy planet, it may be difficult to believe God has us in mind. That the Lord sees me and knows my name, that God knows my deepest secrets, fears, hopes and dreams; that God believes in me and has a purpose, a destiny for us to pursue and fulfill. We struggle to do our best, to make something of our life, and we wrestle constantly with our own failures and doubts, the criticisms of others, and "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune." Jesus encounters us in the midst of these struggles and offers salvation and hope. Jesus demonstrates **how you and I matter to God**.

Jesus is passing through Jericho on his way to Jerusalem where he will be arrested, beaten, and executed. In fact, this is the last stop before the holy city. We could understand if Jesus was preoccupied with the ordeal he was going to face. Whenever we face difficult moments or challenges in life, it is easy for us to turn inward, to look for sympathy or pity from other people rather than considering their needs or the trials they are facing. We may be tempted to lash out at others or to blame them for our hardship. It is so easy to get wrapped up in our own situations and forget about other people.

Jesus is just passing through town, but because his heart and God's heart beat as one for people, Jesus spots Zacchaeus up in a sycamore tree. Luke introduces us to Zacchaeus in such a way that our feelings for him **sour** the more we know about him, especially if we lived in the first century. "A man was there (okay) named Zacchaeus (a man whose name means "**pure**," how nice); he was a chief tax collector (What? Traitor! Collaborator!) and was rich (Thief! Swindler!)." **Zacchaeus acts like the antithesis of his name.** He is an impure, dirty sinner. Many people have intense passion towards those even suspected to be collaborating with the enemy. Zacchaeus wasn't working 9-5 for the IRS. He was working for an occupying army and government to extract taxes from his own people. "Roman officials contracted with local entrepreneurs to collect the indirect taxes, tolls, tariffs, and customs fees in a given area. These entrepreneurs, the "chief tax collectors," were required to pay the contract in advance. They would then employ others to collect the taxes with the hope that the amount collected would yield a profit. The Jews (like Zacchaeus) who collected for the Romans were assumed to be dishonest and were hated by other Jews for their complicity with the Gentile oppressors."¹

Certainly folks in the 21st century share the conviction of many in the crowd in Jericho that if we live and act a certain way, we believe we are more likely to matter to God. Maybe we can believe God cares for good people, but is the Lord even concerned about those who commit terrible acts of violence and abuse, or people who cheat and swindle others like the chief tax collectors and Bernie Madoff's of the world? After all, Luke himself asserts it is the rich who are defrauding others, greedy and unconcerned for the poor who are in trouble. In Luke 6:24, Jesus says "*Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.*" In 12:16, 20, God called the rich farmer a fool. In 16:19-31 the rich man went to Hades (or hell) while poor Lazarus went to the bosom of

¹ New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 9, Luke, John, 356-357.

Abraham. In 18:22 Jesus encounters a rich young ruler and **challenges him to sell all he has and give it to the poor, but he went away sad**. Jesus then states how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God (18:23,25). So when we hear in chapter 19 that Zacchaeus was a *“chief tax collector and rich,”* we expect judgment on one whose dishonesty, impurity, and corruption are about to be revealed. *“Let him have it Jesus! Tell him off.”* We love to see people get knocked down a few pegs, especially if we think they deserve it. What makes Zacchaeus’ situation worse is the higher one’s position in a corrupt system, the greater one’s responsibility in that system. *“No one can be privately righteous while participating in and profiting from a program that robs and crushes other persons (Fred Craddock.)”*

So we’re not surprised Zacchaeus couldn’t get through the crowd to see Jesus. No one is going to do this guy a favor. Maybe take a shot at him as he passes by, a shove from behind perhaps, standing closer together shoulder to shoulder on tip-toes so he can’t see at all. All kinds of small measures of revenge can be taken in the anonymity of a crowd. Zacchaeus not only could see better from a tree, he was probably safer.

Some of us may also have been up a sycamore tree; some of us may even be perched there today. Like Zacchaeus we have experienced the loneliness, the shame, the embarrassment of being crowded out by life, feeling disliked, unwanted, or ignored. Feeling alone, uncared for, inadequate, not fitting in is a hard place to be. As Eugene Levy’s character Walter Kornbluth says in the 1984 film *Splash*, *“I’m really not a bad person. If I had any friends they could tell you.”* That is how I imagine Zacchaeus is feeling. Sometimes it is possible to wonder if we matter at all. If we didn’t exist, would anyone care or notice.

Earlier in Luke 7:34 Jesus had been mocked as *“a friend of tax collectors and sinners.”* He again demonstrates why he deserves that label by looking up and saying, *“Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house **today**.”* Jesus was a master of bold, unconventional love because he had people on his mind. The last thing anyone else expected – the disciples, Zacchaeus, the crowd – was that Jesus would go to be a guest of the biggest impure cheat in town.

Zacchaeus *“hurried down and was happy to welcome him.”* Of course he was happy to welcome him. Nobody else wanted anything to do with Zacchaeus, nor to be associated with him. As Zacchaeus was collecting taxes and building his nest egg he was also learning the truth of what the Beatles sang centuries later, *Money Can’t Buy*

You Love. It might buy you comfort, false friends, and folks to leech off you, but it won't buy the true friendship or acceptance Zacchaeus appears to be lacking in his community.

Luke says ALL who saw it began to grumble. It is very easy for good religious people to forget the purpose of Jesus. Jesus came *"to seek out and to save the lost."* We can't do that if we never spend time with lost people. The sad truth is the longer someone follows Jesus the less time we tend to spend with non-Christian people. We come to faith in Jesus, we join a church, we join a small group, we become increasingly involved in church activities with other believers and the next thing you know we're spending little to no time **inviting people to worship** or other church events, **sharing our spiritual journey** with others and listening to theirs, or **sharing the good news** about Jesus. We can't seek out and save the lost if, like the folks in the crowd, we never want to be seen with them or to associate with them.

This feeling is reflected in the crowd's comment, *"He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner."* The crowd doesn't say, *"Great, Jesus is going to spend time with Zacchaeus; maybe that will help him turn around."* Jesus happens to be brighter than all of us so maybe we should reflect on why he invited himself to Zacchaeus's house rather than anyone else in the crowd who would have loved to have the honor of having Jesus over. If Jesus had gone to a faithful church member's house it inevitably would have been a point of pride and contention. Folks could claim he went there because the people were so good, generous, committed, and served so compassionately. It is evident the folks in Jericho viewed Zacchaeus as perhaps the biggest sinner in town. By going to his house Jesus clarifies for people what he and his followers are about – seeking and saving the lost. Jesus wants the people going to bed that night thinking, *"If someone like Zacchaeus matters to Jesus, I must too."*

Salvation came for Zacchaeus because he wanted to see Jesus so badly he was willing to run and climb a tree. Change came for Zacchaeus because he was willing to accept the invitation of Jesus not only to come into his home but into his life in a transforming way. Salvation came for Zacchaeus because in the love and acceptance demonstrated by Jesus, Zacchaeus realized for the first time that he mattered to God. Some of us may question whether we matter to God. If we truly mattered to God then why...you can fill in the blank.

In Luke 18 the rich young ruler claimed to have obeyed all of the commandments in his desire to please God. But money, comfort, and ease were on his mind and he

walked away from Jesus sad and dejected rather than following him. Zacchaeus apparently hadn't done too well obeying God's commands and he may have lacked many of the young ruler's finer external qualifications, but his heart was changed and began to beat with the heart beat of Jesus and the heart beat of God so he too began to have people on his mind. Rather than going away sad, he joyfully begins giving away his riches **without even being asked**. Zacchaeus gladly and eagerly is willing to do what is right for the poor once he sees that they matter to God. Salvation truly has implications for our household, our social relationships and commitments, and our economics.

Jesus says, "**Today** salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham." The Apostle Paul adds in 2 Corinthians 6:2, quoting Isaiah 49:8, "*At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.*" **See now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation.**" Throughout his gospel Luke declares the good news that God is doing great things **today**. **Today** can be a day of deliverance, redemption, and repentance because even if we didn't know it before **we matter to God**.

Whether we find ourselves in the crowd that murmured against Jesus or in Zacchaeus, an impure outcast in his community, **we all stand in need of the grace of God**. Jesus came to seek us and save us because we matter to God, because God believes in us and has a purpose for us.

Jesus came for all who will go out on a limb for him, no matter how impure we've been. Whenever a Zacchaeus resolves with God's help to live by a new set of values – that is cause for celebration because the Spirit of God is at work.

Whenever people who once believed that they or others were beyond God's love and grace, can be freed to see with Jesus the potential in themselves or others –

that is cause for celebration because the Spirit of God is at work.

Whether we're like Zacchaeus or folks in the crowd – when we realize that God knows everything that is on our minds – that it is all visible and known on God's screen and yet God loves us anyway – **that is cause for celebration because we may grasp for the first time how much we matter to God.**

If we matter to God, so too does everyone else.

Jesus is passing through Jericho. He will never return to follow-up with Zacchaeus or the crowd. It falls to the people that faith community to share love and concern for one another. Will they help others who are lost to feel they matter to God?

Will folks like Zacchaeus truly be accepted? Will people like Zacchaeus share with others and honor the commitment they've made? That is our part in living out the good news of repentance, salvation and transformation since Jesus came into our hearts.