

Highland Presbyterian Church
21st Sunday after Pentecost – October 30, 2022
“Repairing for the Future”
A sermon by Megan McCarty

Isaiah 1:10-18

Luke 19:1-10

The story of Zacchaeus is a consistently fascinating read. It embodies many distinctive elements of a great story—a surprising twist, dramatic turns, and a shocking resolution. In the story, a man of wealth and power cannot find a spot on the street among the crowds as he tries to get a good look at Jesus. This is partially because the man is short but also because he is so deeply despised by people that they crowd him out. So, like a child, this man of short stature climbs a tree along the street to look down for Jesus, and, to his surprise, Jesus looks up at the despised outcast and calls him by name. Jesus decides to spend time at the home of the sinner of sinners. But perhaps the most shocking element of the story is its climax, as Zacchaeus pledges to give half of his possessions to the poor and to pay back to those he defrauded four times what he took.

Jesus has a gift for seeing and affirming what others do not. It is unclear, however, if Zacchaeus *wants* to be noticed. Luke only says that he wants “to see who Jesus was.” In contrast to those who directly approach Jesus, Zacchaeus appears to stay at a comfortable distance. At the same time, his actions are extraordinary enough to suggest—perhaps—a nascent desire for something more. Regardless, Jesus does not need a direct petition to notice someone in need of fellowship. He meets even the most hesitant approach with the same compassion and mercy.

The story of Zacchaeus is a story of reconciliation. Jesus chooses Zacchaeus and stays in his house because he desires for him to be reconciled with God and people. This is after all the same Jesus who asserted, “The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.” More importantly, however, the story reveals the manner in which divine-human reconciliation is inseparably related to human-human reconciliation. It offers a much-needed correction to a misunderstanding of reconciliation that regards it purely as a personal transaction between God and individuals, often with no mind given to its interpersonal effects.

The pledge of Zacchaeus is all the more shocking because of its stark contrast with the story of the rich ruler who came to Jesus previously and inquired about obtaining eternal life. This rich ruler prided himself in that he had done everything right from the time of his youth and he even gave indication of his interest in Jesus’ ministry. However, when given the choice between retaining his wealth and following Jesus, he “became sad; for he was very rich.” In encountering Zacchaeus, Jesus did not make the same request. Zacchaeus freely volunteered his acts of charity and reparation after his meeting with Jesus. His story strongly suggests that any person – even someone guilty of crimes – can indeed be reconciled to God.

It’s hard for us to understand Zacchaeus’s immediate transformation, but I think it has to do with Zacchaeus’s experience of the costly grace of God demonstrated by Jesus.

Zacchaeus saw the risk Jesus took by choosing and fellowshiping with him. Jesus was already being accused of being a friend of sinners by Pharisees, and Jesus' decision to stay with Zacchaeus alienates him further from the entire community. This alienation included Jesus' own disciples, because the text notices, "All, who saw it, began to grumble and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.'" Jesus was intentionally breaking social norms by associating with Zacchaeus and repercussions were sure to follow his actions.

The story of Zacchaeus dramatically renders the manner in which divine reconciliation occurs and further reveals its appropriate motivations among those being reconciled. Zacchaeus's pledge was motivated by neither legalism nor desire for personal perfection, but by God's grace. Having been reconciled with God by the costly grace of Jesus, Zacchaeus was now motivated to reconcile with his neighbors and victims, too. This is evident in Zacchaeus's decision to give half of his wealth to the poor and to compensate four times what he owed to the victims of his deceit, which far exceeded the legal requirement prescribed by the Hebrew Scripture. Zacchaeus's story reveals the heart of grace through its actions: it acts not only to merely fulfill the letter of the law but works to also fulfill the spirit of the law, something that only God's costly grace can fully and consistently achieve.

Zacchaeus's act of reparation was a response to Jesus' reconciliation. As Jesus took a risk and paid a significant price in reconciling with us, that same divine grace compels us to take a risk in reconciling and repairing with others. The story reveals that reconciling with others is rooted in the will of God; thus we should be motivated by God's grace and by our gratitude rather than by guilt or shame. Guilt and shame do not move a person toward God; rather, guilt and shame produce procrastination, fear, and paralysis. The power of divine grace is far stronger than the power of guilt. God's grace, though invisible, is transformative; it sets a new motion in our hearts. Once entered into our heart, it convicts, compels, and convinces us away from the fear, anxiety, and shame toward the hope of reconciliation and a fresh start.

Today is the day in the life of the church that we celebrate Reformation Sunday. We always celebrate this day on the last Sunday in October, which marks the occasion in 1517 when Martin Luther posted his 95 theses on the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. For Presbyterians, this day is a reminder that the grace and mercy given to us in Jesus Christ is the bedrock of our reformed faith. Keeping the most important thing – grace and mercy - in the center of our work together is the only hope for our faith and for this community that we call "church."

This year for Reformation Sunday, we are also celebrating that forty years ago, the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, or the DRMC, in South Africa adopted the Confession of Belhar in its first reading. Belhar was an outgrowth of the DRMC's effort to grapple with the church's participation in and defense of apartheid in South Africa. The confession touches prominently on themes of unity, reconciliation, and justice. Although the Confession of Belhar is inextricably connected to its South African context, its message extends far beyond. The PC(USA) describes Belhar as a powerful statement of belief for the Christian faith that, in part, bears witness to the gift of unity and the church's obligation to it.

In 2016, the 222nd General Assembly approved the inclusion of Belhar in the Book of Confessions because of the clarity of its witness and its capacity to serve as a model for the PC(USA) to “speak and act with similar clarity at a time when it faces division, racism, and injustice.”

Zacchaeus’ changed ways are signs of the changes needed to our systems so that through the fruit of our work and wealth, the poor are lifted up and those who have been exploited are recompensed. The global economic system is sinful and oppressive, delivering huge profits for the few and poverty for the many. These inequalities are rooted in a system of enslavement and exploitation of much of humanity as well as the natural world. There is so much need for reparations for past wrongs and figuring out how to do better for the future. Zacchaeus’ actions point us towards a positive direction of how the power of God’s grace can help us make things right in our own lives as well as in a larger, global sense.

Like many of us, the PC(USA) denominationally, is trying to figure out how to faithfully do the work of repairing for the future. The Presbyterian Mission Agency has taken a step in this direction by working to open the Center for Repair for Historical Harms. Just this week, they announced that the Rev. Anthony Jermaine Ross-Allam will serve as the director of this new initiative. The center, which is still under development, is the result of an 18-month strategic planning process by the PMA that stretched across the denomination and is part of the 2023-2024 Mission Work Plan approved by the 225th General Assembly last summer. Ross-Allam says that, “the center exists so that the PC(USA) can have an organized way to go about the business of repairing the damage done by structural racism and white supremacy within the church and around the globe.” He acknowledges that discussions around this subject matter, including historical harms and reparations, aren’t always easy and inevitably they will generate some discomfort. But the center wants to work with people who are interested in collaboration and finding solutions.

So many of our systems are broken and it can feel overwhelming to figure out what to do as individuals. But as Christians, we are called to figure out how to navigate reparations well. In our own lives, when we wrong someone, we figure out how to say sorry and repair the relationship, even when it means admitting we were wrong or having uncomfortable conversations. Nationally, it means staying in those uncomfortable conversations to acknowledge past wrongdoings and systems of oppression. Globally, it means working to dismantle those systems that uphold injustice and benefit only a few.

Zacchaeus’s story is a great model for us to remember as we try to stay in this work that feels so draining. We must remember that God’s grace is expansive enough to change every heart. So, thankfully, it is not up to us to do all of the work, but it is up to us to remember to have the faith that the work can be done and to always remember the importance of repairing so that we can live into a future where God’s kingdom is a reality. Amen.