

¹ Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it. ² A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was very wealthy. ³ He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because Jesus was going to pass that way. ⁵ 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." ⁶ So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. ⁷ All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." ⁸ Zacchaeus 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." ⁹ Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Response to the Word

One: This is the Word of God for the people of God.

All: Thanks be to God!

Luke 19:1-10

10/26/2025 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

"Stewardship Three: Fruitful"

Rev. Amy Terhune

I never cease to be amused by some of the things that get printed in Church Bulletins. For example, in the lead-up to All Saints Day, one church asked its members to "please place your donation in the envelope along with the deceased person you want remembered." Really? Another church was announcing a class on dealing with anxiety. The announcement read: "Don't let worry kill you – let the Church help." Oh great! And as the annual Rummage Sale approached, one church issued this reminder to the Women's Group: "Ladies, don't forget the annual rummage sale. It's a chance to get rid of those things not worth keeping around the house. Bring your husbands." But I think my all-time favorite was the secretary's synopsis of the pastor's stewardship message. The blurb read, "Last Sunday, Pastor Smith unveiled the church's new stewardship campaign slogan: "I Upped My Pledge—Up Yours!" I'm going to guess that campaign was not quite as successful as they'd hoped.

We have not changed our stewardship campaign messaging. It's still right there at the top of your bulletin: We are a Congregation devoted to loving the whole city and loving the city whole! I won't call it a slogan, because it's not. It's our vision, our marching orders – it's what guides how we organize for mission and ministry today and moving forward. Do we do that perfectly? Not by a long shot. The vision is aspirational. But it's also pragmatic. The leadership here has committed our church family to focusing on ways that highlight the love of God and neighbor and the value of wholeness for the individual, the family, the community, and beyond. These things matter to us because these things matter to God. Time and again, Jesus talks about love and healing and wholeness in his stories and teachings. He talks about being reborn, both as individuals and as communities. Two weeks ago, we spoke of being Grateful. Last week, we talked about being Faithful. Today, we talk about being Fruitful, and how wholeness and fruitfulness intersect.

In our scripture lesson today, we meet Zacchaeus, a man living a broken life; an unhealthy life; a dejected, dispirited, defeated life; a fraction of a life – one neither whole nor fruitful in any way that matters. His story is only told in the gospel of Luke. None of the others record this exchange. And Luke tells us two things about Zacchaeus: first, that he's vertically challenged; and second, that he's a

chief tax collector. I don't know for sure what that means. Nobody really does. But you can probably make some general guesses. I talked last week about how tax collectors aren't popular.

"Remember that Israel is occupied by Rome, so all taxes go to Rome. The Jewish people of Jesus' day were paying taxes to support a government of occupation. But taxes were not only collected for Rome from Jews, they were collected for Rome BY Jews. Zacchaeus was a Jewish man collecting taxes from his own people to support an enemy government, so there was no shortage of people ready to call him a traitor. But it gets worse. Romans didn't force Jews to collect from their own people—they auctioned off that privilege to the highest bidder. Why would anyone bid on the right to be a traitor in the eyes of their neighbors? Because there was money in it, obviously. A lot of money!

"Zacchaeus could charge his neighbors whatever he wanted for taxes, and Rome would back him up. That's what he paid for. So every time he went to a neighbor, there was Rome's demand and then there was Zacchaeus' service charge. His neighbors knew they were being gauged by one of their own, they just didn't know by how much. [2 ¶]s adapted from "Come On Down" by William A. Ritter, April 17, 1988, Nardin Park UMC, Farmington Hills, MI.] And Zacchaeus is the chief tax collector. He's the union president. So when the Bible says Zacchaeus was short in stature, it doesn't only mean that he's lacking a little physically, it also implies that he comes up short morally. He's not just a wee little man, as the only Sunday school song goes. He's a weak little man, at least, when it comes to ethics. Zacchaeus was a short man trying to take a short cut to success.

Several years back, I went to visit a friend in the hospital recovering from knee replacement surgery. When I walked into the hospital room, he and his wife were watching one of the *Star Trek* shows on TV, and when a character got hurt, the Doc had a wand-like device that she would wave back and forth over the injury a couple of times, and poof, the injury was immediately healed. Set 400 years in the future, that is where the creators of the show envision science taking us, which would be awesome. But my friend is tough, and he's got a good head on his shoulders. When we joked about having one of those futuristic cures, he said, "Well, we're not there yet. So if I want to walk, I'm going to have to work." Which was true. Still is. There aren't any short cuts to success. If we aren't measuring up, sooner or later we're going to have to face our shortness for what it is.

"Which may have been the reason Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus," writes Bill Ritter. "He's heard about Jesus. Everyone has. That's why the crowds are lining the street. He's heard how people hang on Jesus' every word. He's heard how Jesus doesn't really hang out with the in crowd—you know, the priests and the scribes and Pharisees and the Sadducees. He's even heard that one of Jesus' disciples—catch this—is a former tax collector. Maybe Zacchaeus has reached a place in his life where he's realizing he can't take short cuts for ever. Maybe he's tired of being long on cash and short on friends. Maybe he's just heard the Beatles sing "Money can't buy me love". I don't know. But whatever it is, it's made him curious about this Jesus, so he decides to check him out. Zacchaeus climbs a tree, probably thinking that he could check Jesus out from a safe distance—see but not be seen—so I imagine he's more than a little surprised to find Jesus' intense and penetrating eyes peering up through the leaves. And as the shock waves from that are still careening through his system, he hears Jesus call to him, "Zacchaeus, Come on down. I'm staying with you today."

Concludes Bill Ritter, "Scripture does not record how Zacchaeus got out of that tree, but I'll lay you ten to one he fell out in pure astonishment! [2 ¶]s adapted from "Come On Down" by William A. Ritter, April 17, 1988, Nardin Park UMC, Farmington Hills, MI.] That being said, Scripture does tell us what everyone else is saying. "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner". Taylor Swift says "Players gonna play, play, play and haters gonna hate, hate, hate..." But Zacchaeus can't just shake, shake, shake this off. There are no short cuts to success, one must work for it, earn it. The problem is

that we can't work our way out of sin. We can't earn it. Only God can clean it up and wipe it out. The crowd wants to trap Zacchaeus in his past. You've always been a dirty rotten scoundrel and you always will be! They've written him off. We're not much different. We still do it to convicts who've been released from prison. We do it to recovering alcoholics. We even do it to students who have a history of poor scholastic achievement. Sometimes, the church does it to the least of these—the ones Jesus tells us to care for. They're just playing the system, angling for another buck!

Eric Ritz tells about a famous preacher once said, "When people tell me that human nature cannot be changed, I am moved to reply that in light of my experience, human nature may well be the only thing that *can* be changed!" We cannot change the course of the moon or the sun. We cannot change the laws of the physical world. We cannot change the movement and flow of the ocean. We cannot change the stars in the skies and the course they move in. However, the Bible pulsates with pages of testimonies of the lives, purposes, events, and habits which have been changed and can be changed by the grace of God. [from "Why Change Is Possible" by Eric S. Ritz, www.Sermons.com.]

Jesus never writes anyone off. He believes unequivocally that people can and do change. And so he reached out to a lost and lonely man. And in that moment of connection, or respect, of fellowship, Zacchaeus experiences transformation. He stands there, knowing full well that tongues are wagging and neighbors are grumbling, and says to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Which doesn't just represent a change in behavior. It represents a new perspective. Zacchaeus is finally acknowledging that up to that point in life, he's viewed people as disposable—as means to end—as pawns to play or sacrifice in his own little game. And he sees now how short-sighted such a view of life can be. To which Jesus responds, "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." Translation: You belong. You're loved. You're being made whole."

But lest you think they walk off together into the sunset, I'm willing to speculate that they go back and share a meal together, and as they sit across the table from one another, Jesus has some pretty frank words to say about those who aren't at the table and what their needs are and what Zacchaeus' new life needs to be about; and how the road is narrow and uphill most of the way, and how God has poured out his grace on a man with obvious talents and potential to give him what he needs to do the work.

Grace is not a short cut. One of the confirmation kids asked me last spring what the difference is between grace and mercy. Grace is receiving what we do not deserve, while mercy is not receiving what we do deserve. Mercy saves us from punishment, despair, and death. But grace is God's power unleashed. Grace is God's love in motion. Grace is God's gift of meaning and purpose and direction and fortitude. Grace is what God gives us to do the work. Grace lifts us from surviving to thriving. Grace elevates us from frantic to fruitful. Grace is how people change. And Grace is how social orders change, too.

In protestant circles, this last Sunday in October is often celebrated as Reformation Sunday, commemorating Martin Luther's defiant act of nailing his 95 theses, or protests, against the catholic church to the door of the Wittenburg Cathedral on October 31, 1517. Within four years, he'd gained tremendous popularity in Germany advocating for the end of papal authority, decrying the selling of indulgences, and publishing the first bible in German so that the average person could read it. For these crimes, he was summoned to a trial, called a diet, by the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V in the town of Worms. There, in 1521 at the Diet of Worms, he was pressured by the high inquisitor to recant his written works against the church. He famously concluded his closing statement at the trial saying, "...My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go

against my conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I can do no other. May God help me. Amen.”

We remember those words – defiant, audacious, principled – because they’re spoken in a moment in history when the entire collected might of worldly powers were arrayed against him and Martin Luther would not yield. He staked everything on his conviction that heaven couldn’t be bought, grace couldn’t be earned, and the Holy Spirit could not be stopped. And he knew that was true because he had tried to earn it, nearly destroyed his health trying to be good enough, praying all hours of the night, laying naked in the snow to punish himself, spending hours in confession, until his mentor finally sent him to teach the Bible to young priests, hoping it would help get him out of his own head. When he actually had to study the Word, understand it well enough to teach it, he encountered there the living Word – the Jesus that cleansed a grateful leper and made him whole; the Jesus that gave hope to widows and new life to tax collectors, the Jesus that redeemed Paul and Nicodemus and Mary Magdalene and the woman at the well – that same Jesus transformed Martin Luther, and instead of trying to earn it, grace became the driving force in his life. He put everything he had, every cent, every fiber of his being, into God’s hands, and he reformed the church, to be sure – but he also changed the world. Luther laid the groundwork for the enlightenment, paving the way for scientific advancement, democratic government, and universal human rights. He was far from perfect, but he was wholly committed, and we’re still enjoying the fruit of his labor.

I’m not Martin Luther. Maybe you’re not either. But we are living in a time of reformation and rebirth. What the church looks like in 30, 40, 50 years, and how it conducts ministry will not look the same as it has these past 500 years. That’s not theory. That’s fact. Time only moves forward. There is no going back. So we can either cower in fear of the changes we face, or we can anticipate them boldly trusting that the new thing God is about to do is going to advance the Kingdom among us. This congregation has so much going for it. Not only in our long history, not only in the values that undergird our vision, but in each one of you. Together, we have decided that helping people overcome substance abuse disorder is worthwhile, as is caring for their families. Together, we’ve celebrated the value of art and music and movement in nurturing whole persons and whole communities, so we make room for SAWA and Musico and Thai Chi and Yoga and Saginaw Youth Choir and music lessons and bells and concerts. Together, we’ve committed to being a safe a loving space for communities that are marginalized and undervalued in our world, which is why we partner with PFLAG and Ezekiel Project, and why we serve free meals and send backpacks home with kids. Together, we’ve chosen to invest in teens and adults who are differently abled, who may not move the same or think quite the same, which is why we’ve supported the work going on now in the Vision Wing. Together, we are learning that loving the whole city means caring about more than this block – it means working on behalf of the East Side and Old Town, and Downtown, and Southwest Village and Northmoor and Buena Vista and Shields and Carrollton and Kochville and everyplace in between. Together, we’re building on the grace that continues to power our witness, which is why we keep the lights on and the water running and the staff paid and the internet working – not because it’s easy, but precisely because it’s hard and it changes lives and it’s what lays the groundwork for love and wholeness.

So I invite you to come forward with your pledge card and your offering. Bring your brokenness. Bring your fears and doubts. But also bring your hope. Bring your dreams. Bring your gratitude. Bring your faith. Bring your gifts. And trusting that God will turn it all to fruitfulness, we, like Zacchaeus, lay all of it before the altar. For the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost. And that is why we’re loving the whole city and loving the city whole. Come as you are able...