

November 23, 2008
The National Presbyterian Church

Sheer Grace

Luke 19:1-10

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Today is Thanksgiving Sunday, and we have so much to be thankful for. We have another year that we can express thankfulness to God for his faithfulness through this year. And I'm just very grateful, too, for the privilege I have to be here in this congregation. I want to thank you for the friendship that you've shown me already and my wife Shirley as well. So, this is a time to be thankful. I just looked at the Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow stewardship card. This is the time of year in which we're grateful to God, and it's the time when we think about how to support and be supportive of the ministry of his work around the world. I love this line. "In grateful recognition of God's blessing, I welcome the privilege to dedicate to the church locally and throughout the world my offerings and my gifts." It's a privilege to be a part of the ministry of the Lord and the ministry of His kingdom.

I have an interesting text for us today. It's in Luke's Gospel, the 19th chapter. If you want to open up to one of the pew Bibles and just follow along. This text occurs during a journey that Jesus was making from Galilee to the south. It occurs at Jericho, from here he'll go up to Bethany. There the raising of Lazarus will occur and the entry into the city of Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday. So, this Jericho event happens on the eve of Holy Week. This quite remarkable text is well known. There probably are more Daily Vacation Bible School portrayals of this text than any other incident in the ministry of Christ where he met people, because this is a text where Jesus meets someone. Listen to it. "Jesus entered Jericho and he was passing through. And there was a man named Zacchaeus, and he was a chief tax collector and rich." You'll see in a few moments that Luke is not paying a compliment to this man. "And he sought to see who Jesus was but could not on account of

the crowd because he was of small stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree.” It’s interesting, not an olive tree with little leaves, but a sycamore tree with large leaves so he could perhaps watch but not be watched, who knows? “But he climbed into a sycamore tree to see Jesus for he was to pass that way.”

I always appreciated one thing about this text because I’m a little on the short side, too, and when you’re on the short side, you have to figure out where to stand to see famous people because the tall people, if they’re in front of you, it makes it hard to see. I remember when I was an undergraduate at Berkeley, Pandit Nehru, Jawaharlal Nehru, the prime minister of India, came and spoke at Charter Day at Cal campus, and he was a great man and I wanted to see him. I saw there were the Secret Service agents and large cars out in front of the Hearst Greek Theatre. And so I said if I got near those cars, I would see Nehru up close. And so once the event was over, I dashed out and got near those cars, and it’s true, Pandit Nehru came by, and he was only about 10 or 15 feet away. Of course, there were Secret Service agents around there, too, but I got the chance to see him. And you know short people tend to have that thinking ahead instinct. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus!” He saw him. Jesus knew him, “Zacchaeus, I see you in that tree. Make haste. Come down for I want to stay in your house today.” So he made haste and came down, and he received Jesus joyfully.” This wonderful word “joy” is used here, “joyfully.” Now, the plot thickens. And when they saw it, they all murmured. Usually, it’s the Pharisees and the scribes who murmur. But here they all murmured, probably the disciples too. And now we could see why Luke was not complimenting Zacchaeus when he called him a chief tax collector and rich. They all murmured saying, “He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.” Tax collectors were considered sinners for sure. They had sold their privilege of being a citizen of the people, knowing the people, and they sold that out to the Romans because the Romans enriched their empire by means of taxation. And that means they had to know where the wealth was. And who would better know but an insider. So, these people were protected by Roman soldiers and would give information to the Romans as to where the wealth was, and they would probably also take bribes from people. This man was not just a tax collector; he was the chief tax collector, which means he had people underneath him who were probably paying him bribes as well. So he was very wealthy. That’s Zacchaeus.

“I must stay at your house today. He came down joyfully and said, Yes.’ And then the people murmured. He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.” And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, this is probably the next day. He said, “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.” And then these last two sentences close off this

incident. Jesus said to him, "Today, salvation has come to this house." Remember the last week; we saw that Paul used that word, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel for in it the power of God for salvation." Salvation has come to this house. And then He adds another line, "Since he also is a son of Abraham." The very birthright that he had sold out in order to be a good tax collector, Jesus now restores. He is a son of Abraham. That is the great identity marker for the Jews, to be children of Abraham. And then the last sentence, "For the Son of Man," and our Lord does not refer to himself as Son of God, that's said about him. He always uses this hidden phrase to refer to himself. It is Messianic but it's hidden. The Son of Man. It shows his identification with us, "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost," there's that word again, "make safe the lost."

Let's pray together. Lord, what an amazing text. And now may the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts on this text, be acceptable in thy sight. O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.

Notice in the text, there are series of surprises. The first surprise is that Jesus would notice one person in a crowd. We don't expect that from famous people that they would notice us. We don't expect it in a crowd scene like this. That's why when he names him and sees him in a tree, that's a surprise. The second surprise is that he would befriend someone who has done so much harm. Zacchaeus has done harm to the people, especially the poor, especially the people that are standing in that great crowd. And evidently they knew who he was because they murmured about that, yet Jesus, by surprise announces that he would spend the night with Zacchaeus. You've got to realize that in the first century world, to spend the night in someone's home has far more meaning than would appear to us today; it shows that you have an obligation to them and you feel a bond to them, therefore it's a significant fellowship marker. And so that's a surprise that He would spend the night with the person who has done so much harm. And the third surprise is that He would restore this man who had abandoned his identity by his own choice in order to collaborate with the Romans, and now Jesus would restore him to his Abrahamic destiny. And then the fourth surprise is that such a man as Zacchaeus who has precisely made his money by being hard-hearted, by defrauding people, and taking bribes, and favoring the Roman oppressors, that a man like this would be so repentant and so completely generous. Notice, "Half of my goods I give to the poor, and those who are defrauded line up, I'll repay you fourfold." He said this, not a jury, not a judge, ordered it but he said it, and that's a surprise. These surprises I think converge in one sentence so that if we can fully understand this sentence, we can understand what is happening here. We can understand better what Paul said last week when he said he is not ashamed of the Gospel. We can understand the Gospel

if we understand this sentence. And that sentence is, "They all murmured." Why did they murmur? Let me reflect on that.

They murmured because they were disappointed in Jesus. They are looking for Messiah. We know that. A great crowd is gathered even there at Jericho. His reputation has already spread. After all, Jericho is near where John the Baptist had done all his teaching, at the Jordan River. So they are prepared for Jesus. And they're prepared for him to be Messiah. And they're looking for the Messiah. And they have expectations as to what the Messiah will do. Let me show you from John the Baptist himself. Right within this very area where Jesus is now speaking and where this event occurs with Zacchaeus, John the Baptist, more than two years earlier, had been there and pointed out Jesus Christ as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. John the Baptist's speech is recorded by Luke, the same author who recorded this narrative in Chapter 19.

The crowds came. The great crowds came to meet John the Baptist. Listen to this, verse 15, chapter 3 of Luke. "And the people were in expectation and all men question in their hearts concerning John the Baptist whether perhaps he was the Christ." Some people actually wondered if he was the Messiah. John answered them all saying, "I baptize you with water but he who is mightier than I is coming; the throng of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." And now listen to his description of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, because right after this he'll point to Christ and say, "Behold, this is the Man." "I am not worthy to untie his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." John does not mean fire to warm your hearts. He means fire to burn up the evildoers. I'll prove it to you. Listen to the next line. "He will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand." This is a direct quotation from the Book of Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament. "His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor, to gather the wheat into the granary"--we sang that in, "Come, Ye Thankful People Come," earlier, this line is in that song--"to gather the wheat into the granary," now hold your breath, "but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." Well, that's John the Baptist's introduction to Jesus Christ, and notice the next line in Luke's Gospel. He says, "So with many other exhortations, he preached good news to the people."

It's good news to the wheat. It's not good news to the chaff. But that's the whole point. Jesus Christ, the Messiah, is to be like Elijah. In fact, the Seder meal which is observed in modern Judaism, the Passover meal has one empty chair at the Passover, and the last thing that happens in the Seder meal is for the littlest boy in the family to go to the door to see if Elijah has come. That's called the Elijah chair, if the Messiah has come. Because the Messiah will come into the Elijah chair, will fulfill Elijah, the great prophet Elijah who won the battle against Ahab and Jezebel, and the 400 false prophets of Baal. Remember the battle on Mount Carmel? And after

he won that battle, all 400 false prophets were lined up and killed. Elijah won at Mount Carmel and the evildoers were destroyed. Elijah is the hero. And when the people look to the Messiah, we can tell by the end of Malachi, and from John the Baptist's speech, they were looking for one like Elijah who would destroy the evildoers, who would point them out and blame them so that we can see who they are. And then they would be burned like the chaff, and in the granary, so that finally the good people would be protected.

And this is what the people look for when they thought of the Messiah. We can see it in the Dead Sea scroll commentaries too. They were looking for this kind of Messiah, a warrior-king like David and a prophet like Elijah. Well, Jesus hardly looks like Elijah in this incident. You think about it. He doesn't look like Elijah here. In fact, a little later, you know, John the Baptist will be put in jail and he will send disciples up to Galilee actually before this incident, he sent friends up to Galilee to Jesus and said, "Are you the Messiah or shall we look for somebody else?" John was disappointed. I think our Lord comforted him in the most profound way. That's another whole story. But John the Baptist knew what he expected the Messiah to be. The people knew what they expected and they looked for a prophet like Elijah who would conquer the evildoers. And that's not what Jesus is doing here. He starts out alright. "Zacchaeus, I see you in the tree!" That's good. That is very good. The people would not murmur about that. "You come down, you snake in the tree! People, here is an evildoer. See," we love to be able to point to the evildoers. To point to who are the evildoers. That's what they wanted to do.

"Zacchaeus, you come down from the tree! I want to spend tonight in your house." Everybody is amazed and noticed that Zacchaeus was joyous. He was joyous. Not the people though. I like to think about this incident that Zacchaeus gained ground, that Jesus lost ground because he disappointed the people, he won no friends this day. That's why it says, "They all murmured," probably including the disciples. They're all baffled. Why is he doing this? Zacchaeus though gained ground. Zacchaeus is honored by Jesus, and you saw what happened. Our Lord restores him, and at the end our Lord says, "This is why I've come, to seek and to save, to make safe the lost." So, Jesus identifies with Zacchaeus. And in one week, the shadow of the cross will cover this incident, because within one week our Lord will do this very same thing at the cross. He will fulfill Elijah. He will fulfill King David, the promise of the warrior-king David, and the promise of the powerful Elijah will be fulfilled. Today is Christ the King Sunday, in which we honor Christ as the King. And he will do it, but he will do it at the cross in a way that we never expected. At just the moment the 400 false prophets are lined up and are prepared to be destroyed, a surprising thing will happen at Mount Calvary. Instead of the evildoers including us being judged and condemned, Jesus Christ will take our place. He will take the place of the false prophets. And instead of the false proph-

ets being killed, he will be killed. He will take their place. He will take our place. No one expected that. That is the profound surprise in this incident that no one expects. Here we have a hint of it here in that he identifies with Zacchaeus, so that Zacchaeus gains salvation, Jesus pays the price for that salvation on Good Friday, Jesus will take our place. He will conquer sin, and conquer death, and conquer the power of the devil by absorbing our sin, and our death, and the power of evil, and He will disarm them by taking them.

Now that's another story. That will happen later. But right now we see the shadow of that Good Friday event here. It's an amazing surprise and it's right here in this incident. I want you to notice what's happening in this incident. Zacchaeus is experiencing grace. I titled this sermon, "Sheer Grace" because that's the only way to describe what's happening here. Notice the grace that he experiences. First, it's authoritative. It's powerful. Jesus chooses to do what he chooses to do. He has the power to restore and the power to create a new beginning, the power to heal is greater than the power to kill or to blame. And so we're seeing a greater power than we have ever seen before, an authoritative power. Jesus Christ surprises everyone with his power. He will do it at the cross and at the empty tomb as well. Notice also that this grace is concrete. It's definite. It's not theoretical. It's an event that happens. And it's an event that they experience. They experienced watching Zacchaeus. "I want to spend tonight in your house." And Jesus spends the night with Zacchaeus. And Zacchaeus experiences the grace that is definite and concrete.

You know what you must not do, with this incident, is say, "Oh, isn't this a wonderful illustration of the love of Christ?" Brothers and sisters, this is not an illustration of the love of Christ. It's the very thing itself. Christ's love is concrete. It's what he does when he touches a person with leprosy. It's what he does when he goes to the cross in our behalf. It's what he does when he spends his night with this man, this hated man, and sets him free. And then notice also, it's profoundly personal. It is totally personal, and it has a totally personal result. Zacchaeus, not a jury, not a judge, but Zacchaeus himself says, "Lord, half of my goods I give to the poor, and those who I've defrauded, I repay fourfold." He expresses a genuine repentance that's his own. And Jesus preserves that. He has his own repentance and he becomes generous. Why? Because of what Christ has done for him. I try to think about how to illustrate this myself, maybe a fun way to think about what's happening here, of what's causing this generosity for this man who has precisely made all his money by focusing on his own corrupt accumulation of wealth all the while protected by the Romans as he is doing it and then suddenly there is change. Why the generosity? I try to think of a way to illustrate it, and I came up with a little story that I made up.

Have you ever been to a great reception? You know a food reception in a grand hall

maybe it's a wedding reception where they have really nice food. I can always tell how good a reception is, as to whether they have a sculptured ice art object in the middle of the room. That's your first test. And you walk in the room, and you see an ice sculpture in the middle, this is a first class reception. So, we alert ourselves to the good receptions so that we don't waste time at the corn chips table or at the carrots and celery, but go to the ice sculpture right away. And you have to get there before the greedy people would get there for all the best food items. And I especially like it when there are shrimp, you know, floating down through the ice sculpture. You go over it. Now, one problem about reception is that they only offer small plates, a little tiny plate. But you go to the shrimp display, and I figured it out, line them up around and make them snug around the corner, you can get quite a few shrimps even in a little round plate. And then move over to the smoked salmon, which always go very fast because, you know, people are greedy. They'll go for those right away. So, get the shrimp, and then, of course, the smoked salmon, get it on your plate. And so stay near the middle of the reception. Don't go out on the edges where the chips and the vegetables are. They fill up your plate anyway and make it hard for the shrimp and roast beef slices to fit.

All right, now I'm going to make my story more complicated. You walk into this reception. You go over to the ice sculpture. You're walking with your son and perhaps other members of your family, and the host catches up with you. The host then says, "Earl, I'm so glad you came to the reception. I was hoping you would come and you brought your kids, too. I'm so happy you did. This is just wonderful that you came in the reception. I know you love shrimp. You told me that. I know that. And smoked salmon? You're from the Northwest after all. I know you love that. This is Norwegian but it's still very good. Earl, I want to tell you something. Look over there on the dessert table, Siberian peach pie, your very favorite pie. It's over there. Great Earl, when you leave today please drop by the kitchen. I've asked the chef to make a whole plate of shrimp just for you and smoked salmon just for you and a whole Siberian peach pie just for you. Take it home. I want you to have it. Earl, have a nice time at the reception." Now, notice how we change. We walk over to the carrots and celery section. Get a few chips. You say to people, "Be sure to try the shrimp. Be sure to go over and try the salmon." Now what's happened to you? Why are you suddenly so generous? I figured it out. Your needs have been met. Your needs have been met. That's what grace does at a far profounder level than with food. Grace fulfills your needs and one result is generosity.

Karl Barth describes this by the phrase "evangelical ethic", "We love others because God first loved us." Is the way Saint John tells it. When we experience Christ's love, when we experience his grace, the inevitable result is generosity of spirit. We loosen our hands. It happened to Zacchaeus. We can see it right in front of our eyes. "Half of my goods I give to the poor, and those who I've defrauded, I repay." Why? Be-

cause his profoundest needs have been met. Why not share with others? And that's exactly what our Lord has done with this man in this amazing incident from Luke's Gospel. It's a wonderful text for Christ the King Sunday because we've just watched Jesus Christ the King in action. And he's able--he has a power that's able to change life. He is able to bring hope where there was fear. He's able to make us safe. And that's the last line of this text, "The Son of Man came to seek, to find, and to make safe, the lost."

Heavenly Father, thank you for this text, thank you for the sheer grace of Jesus Christ, He is the teacher who makes the difference. Thank you for that. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

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Sunday Worship at 9:15 & 11 a.m.
Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.

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