

Living from the Inside Out
 Acton Congregational Church (UCC)
 30 October 2022
 Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Texts: Psalm 119:165-175
 Luke 19:1-10

“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.’”

– Luke 19:8

Prayer
Living God,
Overcome our spiritual fatigue and religious jadedness
With the Good News of the Gospel.
Speak to us this morning once again
And prepare us to be Christ’s eyes, hands, and feet in the world. Amen.

Last Tuesday, after my brother shared on a video chat some of the fascinating writing he is doing for his doctoral program in Portugal, he asked me what is occupying my mind these days. I expressed my concerns about the presidential election in Brazil that is taking place today and about the bizarre “ReAwaken America” religiopolitical movement in the U.S. that merges rightwing politics, theology and entertainment to make the case that the central issue in American politics is a spiritual battle between Christianity and an evil globalist cabal led by the woke socialist Left. My brother is not a religious person, so I rarely broach the topic of religion with him, but I did bring up my disquiet about the impact of COVID on the mission and ministries of mainline churches like ours. At this crucial moment in human history, when a notable segment of Evangelical, Pentecostal and Catholic Christians around the world are rallying behind authoritarian populist politicians to fuse a very particular kind of Christian theology with the ideology of nationalism, the brave prophetic imagination of mainline historic congregations is vitally important.

In a recent article, religious scholar Diane Butler Bass named what is at stake if the prophetic voice of mainline churches is not heard loud and clear in the public square. Prophecy, she wrote, undermines the economic and political structures of society and offers a meaningful alternative reality for life in community. The problem with the architecture of Christian nationalism is that it is bolstered by a pyramid-shaped vision of the world. In the imagination of Christian nationalists, God created a world of clear hierarchies and definite roles where men are privileged over women, the winners of capitalism have total control over the earth’s resources, the rich decide how and when to help the poor free from any government-mandated wealth redistribution programs, Christianity is the only true religion, conservative Christian values take precedence over

human rights, and Christian nations made up of mostly white Europeans rule unrivaled over everyone else.ⁱ

In the Bible though, God always proclaims and God's prophets always press toward a non-hierarchical social structure that is best represented by the table. Jesus was often accused by the people who were uncomfortable with his open and affirming ministry of eating and drinking with sinners and tax-collectors.ⁱⁱ This may have been Zacchaeus' impetus to scamper up that sycamore tree in Jericho. He probably knew Jesus' reputation and wanted to take a good look at the young charismatic rabbi who sat at the table of those who were not welcome anywhere else. As one of my seminary friends once put it, Jesus was a "party animal." He never passed up an opportunity to attend a dinner party hosted by people with both colorful and unsavory life stories. During his short-lived public ministry, Jesus invited guests to his own table that no upright person would want to have in their home or introduce to their families. Despised tax collectors, women of ill repute, rogues, vagabonds, and all sorts of riffraff found a seat at Jesus' table. He ignored all the social conventions and religious requirements of his day to make his table into a tiny window with a splendid view of God's Kingdom. Jesus had a vision for life in community and showed it to his followers by his choice of table manners and guests.

Many of our Catholic and Evangelical siblings in the faith tend to believe that following Christ is about giving intellectual assent to immutable doctrines and unquestionable creeds. There is a great story about a monk who died and was interred in the monastery wall. Three days later, the other monks heard noises inside the crypt, so they quickly removed the stones and found their brother alive. Awash in wonder, the monks asked their brother what heaven was like. "**Well,**" he said, "***It's nothing at all the way our theology says it is...***" The monks looked at each other and, without thinking twice, they put the man back in the wall and sealed the crypt again.ⁱⁱⁱ For many Christians today, following Christ is still about believing and repeating thoughtlessly certain things about Jesus, about humankind, about the Church and about the world, but Jesus was much more interested in living out God's love than in the right way to believe. His table is a place where boundaries are crossed, barriers are removed, prejudices are erased, exclusion is named and replaced with acceptance, gender equality is celebrated, every voice is heard, diversity is God's will for humanity, and where the first words every new guest hears are always: "***Pull up a chair and take a seat.***"

The crowd in today's Gospel lesson cannot understand Jesus' table ministry. In fact, they are offended by the overt and even ebullient manner by which Jesus invites himself to stay at Zacchaeus' home. In their minds, Jesus has gone too far. He blurred the lines their society, cultural traditions and theology had put in place to divide human beings between friend and foe, pure and impure, faithful and unfaithful. The meaning of Zacchaeus' name in Hebrew is "*righteous*" or "*innocent*," but for the people of Jericho he was a rich chief tax-collector above all else. They knew that Zacchaeus oversaw the whole system of imperial taxation in the city of Jericho. He managed a sizable group of officials who collected taxes to fund the Roman occupation. In their eyes, Zacchaeus is a traitor, a collaborator,

someone who takes money from the Jews to give to the Romans and lines his own pockets in the process. Most of the city shunned Zacchaeus as an unrepentant sinner. The Jericho crowd could bring themselves to accept Jesus' challenging instructions to the rich young Jewish man to give all his possessions to the poor and follow him, even though the wealthy young ruler observed the Law to a T and his wealth was theologically justified as God's blessing.^{iv} They had no quarrel with the healing of the blind beggar on the outskirts of Jericho.^v It made sense that Jesus would have a preferential option for the poor, the underprivileged, and the marginalized; but, here, the same Jesus who said, "***It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God***,"^{vi} is extending kindness, hospitality, and unconditional acceptance to a man who is not only rich, but allegedly corrupt. Just when they thought they had Jesus all figure out, Jesus shocked the crowd in Jericho with this table hospitality.

Author Brian McLaren said in his book, "*Do I Stay Christian?*" that people are abandoning the Christian faith because the dominant forms of Christianity in this country have become "***conservative, nostalgic, arthritic, cramped and stuck***."^{vii} He compares Christianity to a huge ship capable of amazing voyages, but laments that the Christian religion is unable to set sail because the Church has hardened the Christian identity into a heavy anchor of beliefs and traditions the crew cannot pull up.^{viii} But the Jesus we meet in the Gospels did not share our religious hesitation to practice new ways of thinking, seeing, hoping, believing and living. He lived his faith from the inside out rather than from the outside in. Jesus offered himself to humanity with openhearted love. He refused to give into the religious obsession of his time with purity laws and holiness and social roles and religious hierarchies. Jesus cultivated what Zen Buddhism calls a beginner's mindset that allowed him to walk into every situation of life with curiosity, wonder, and a genuine openness to learn, be changed, grow and evolve. This living from the inside out with a beginner's mind rather than with an inflexible, judgmental and narrow-minded set of beliefs allowed Jesus to see Zacchaeus for whom he really was.

The Church with a capital "C" has judged Zacchaeus harshly. Our collective confirmation bias has given us permission to keep using the crowd's grumbling and allegations about Zacchaeus' sinfulness as a foil for Jesus' radical grace and life-saving love. New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine, who is a practicing Jew and a prominent scholar of Jewish-Christian relations, noted that there is a tendency among Christians of all theological stripes to employ Judaism as a negative foil for Christianity – whatever Jesus stands for, Judaism cannot live up to; whatever Jesus is against, Judaism embodies.^{ix} We may not like to hear it, but our biblical theology is addicted to the notion that Christianity is the fulfillment of what Judaism promises and, therefore, our sermons, anthems, hymns, prayers, services and overall religious worldview can sound and be very anti-Jewish. This may be one of the reasons for the translation of Zacchaeus' response to Jesus. The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible from which I read the Gospel lesson this morning makes it appear as if Zacchaeus experienced a deep personal transformation as he scrambled down the tree. "***Look,***" He says to Jesus, "***half of my possessions... I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four***

Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

times as much.” The issue with this translation is that it puts all the key verbs in the future while, in the Greek text, the verbs are in the present tense. When Zacchaeus hurries down to take Jesus to his home, he overhears the people around Jesus calling him a sinner and rather than falling to his knee and pleading for forgiveness, Zacchaeus uses that moment of grace Jesus created to let all his accusers in earshot know that they have been judging him wrongly. He stood there and said, **“Look, half of what belongs to me, I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I give back four times the amount.”**^x What a difference a translation makes!

It is at the very least strange that so many people in Jericho did not know that Zacchaeus was so committed to treating the poor with such generosity and that he also went above the restitution called for by the Law whenever he became aware of misusing his position to turn a blind eye to shakedowns or kickbacks.^{xi} Perhaps, Zacchaeus was already practicing one of the teachings of the popular friend of tax collectors, **“When you give money to the poor, don’t call attention to yourself... When you help someone out... just do it – quietly and unobtrusively. That is the way your God... working behind the scenes, helps you out.”**^{xii} Perhaps, Zacchaeus tried to live an “examined life” and every day he made an effort to be the kindest, humblest and fairest version of himself in spite of his day job. Perhaps he did his best to integrate justice and generosity into his less-than-ideal world by quietly giving back to the poorest and neediest in Jericho. Perhaps, Jesus saw in Zacchaeus’ curious eyes the honest desire to live from the inside out even though, despite his wealth and his generosity, he was treated as a pariah in the city where few would have accepted an invitation to sit at his dinner table.

Zacchaeus’ encounter with Jesus reminded me of a poem by Brazilian poet Fernando Sabino –

**“After everything, three things remain:
The certainty that we are always beginning again...
The certainty that it is imperative that we go on...
The certainty that we may be interrupted before finishing.**

**Therefore, we must
Turn the interruption into a new path...
the fall into a new dance movement...
fear into a ladder...
dreaming into a bridge...
our search into an encounter...”**^{xiii}

The wee little man of our Sunday school song turned the interruption of Jesus’ passing through Jericho into a new path for his life. He turned his spiritual search for an authentic life that might allow him to be seen and accepted beyond his occupation into an encounter with Christ. He confronted the people of Jericho and turned his fear of rejection into a ladder to get out of the emotional, psychological, social and religious prison that held

him hostage to a version of his own self the townspeople had made up. His awkward almost comical climbing up and down the sycamore tree became a new dance movement of hope and his dream of living a fuller life became a bridge to salvation. And all that took place because of Jesus' wildly imaginative, reality re-ordering table fellowship. Jesus' graceful offer to stay at Zacchaeus', to eat and drink at Zacchaeus' table, challenged the way people thought of him. On the surface, Jesus was just being Jesus, inviting himself to another dinner party at the house of another tax collector, but he was also using his imagination to contradict old certainties, firmly held assumptions, intransigent attitudes, and a dualistic vision of human life that reduces people to simplistic categories of good or bad, sinner or saved, with us or against us. Salvation in today's Gospel story happens because Jesus helped the people in Jericho understand Zacchaeus better, to see him as a complex but kind-hearted and faithful human being, and to embrace him a "**son of Abraham**," a member of the covenant community. Rather than judgment, shame, blacklisting and hostility, Jesus' table ministry encouraged everyone around him to use their imagination to make space in their hearts and minds for compassion, humility, inclusion, friendship, solidarity and harmony. He taught the people in Jericho that rather than having the right beliefs, he hoped they would practice living from the inside out, always keeping a beginner's mind in every life circumstance.

For all our complicated past, problematic history, and institutional flaws, historic Protestant denominations along with our progressive Evangelical and liberal Catholic peers have sought to free Christ from the stained-glass beliefs, doctrines, dogmas, liturgies and language that get in the way of the welcoming, affirming, big-hearted, open-minded table ministry of the Jesus of the Gospels. Oftentimes, mainline congregations have sacrificed church growth and finances to break loose from iron-clad theologies that make Jesus' table inaccessible to those accused of being unrepentant sinners. We have tried, not always successfully, to create a space of grace in our churches that honors and values the dignity of every person. As best as we know how, we have infused our services and ministries with a vision of a world without religious and social pyramids. We have used our imagination, albeit too timidly at times, to protest and challenge the dominant realities of society. We have pressed toward that non-hierarchical open table as an alternative possibility for human life on Earth. We do not always do it right, but mainliners keep trying to live from the inside out as Jesus instructed the people of Jericho to do. For all these reasons, I told my brother on the video chat that it is disconcerting to see so many people giving up on mainline congregations, especially now that churches are slowly re-gathering in person. I worry that if our voice becomes too soft, the pyramid-loving Christianity will define the Christian faith in the public square for years to come.

I mentioned to my brother that today would be our Pledge Sunday and, for the first time in almost 22 years of ministry, I wasn't completely sure if people, especially those who feel disconnected from the church mostly because of COVID, would still volunteer and give. My brother listened and then said, "**Tell them that if they do not give or increase their pledge, they will go to hell.**" I reminded him that the Medieval Catholic Church already tried that fundraising strategy and ended up dividing the Roman Church in half. By

the way, on the liturgical calendar of the church, today is Reformation Sunday, the occasion when Protestant Christians remember the 95 theses Martin Luther nailed to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany on October 31st, 1517, protesting among other things the sale of indulgences. Don't worry, I am not going to talk about the Reformation, but I want to talk about the future of our mainline congregation right here in Acton. As tempting as it is to sell indulgences to raise money – in fact, one of our church members sent me an email last week asking if he would find me in the back of the sanctuary today selling tickets that can get you and your loved ones out of purgatory and hell – the answer is “no” because I have something more pressing to encourage all of us to support the non-hierarchical and welcoming table ministry of Christ here at ACC. As Brian McLaren put it, ***“At this moment, I hope you feel the acute, almost unbearable irony: more than ever before, the world needs religions that teach us to value and love the planet, to see its inherent value and sacredness apart from the human economy. The world needs religions that teach us to love our neighbor as ourselves, remembering that our neighbor includes the refugee, the sick, the poor, the outsider, the outcast, the other, and even the enemy. The world needs religions that teach us to transform our swords into plowshares, our bullets into trumpets, and our nuclear submarines into artificial reefs. The world needs religions that value love and interdependence, not money and competition. The world needs religions that are anti-racist, anti-authoritarian, gender-equal, and characterized by compassion and wisdom rather than greed, arrogance, and dogmatism.”***^{xiv} And Christianity can be one of those religions. Mainline churches can continue to evolve, learn, and expand the world-re-ordering table ministry of Jesus. We can counter the inflexible and divisive pyramid-vision of Christian nationalism with a prophetic and imaginative voice that calls humanity to live from the inside out. We can practice new ways of relating to one another and keep a beginner's mind to help us see the possibility of coming together with our neighbors to work for a more hopeful, equal, just, generous and life-affirming future for humankind. Our salvation is hanging in the balance, and I am grateful that ACC has a message, a dream, a vision for human life inspired by Jesus that the world needs. May you and I have the courage of Zacchaeus to tell the world who we are and give generously to support our church. May the first words people hear in our church always be: pull up a chair, take a seat, there is a place for you at the table of Jesus Christ.

May it be so. Amen.

ⁱ Diane Butler Bass in *On Prophets and Politics*, The Cottage, 27 October 2022 [<https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/on-prophets-and-politics>].

ⁱⁱ Matthew 9:10; Luke 7:34.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cited by Parker J. Palmer in *On the Brink of Everything*, pp. 104-105.

^{iv} Luke 18:18-22.

^v Luke 18:35-43.

^{vi} Luke 18:25.

^{vii} Brian D. McLaren in *Do I Stay Christian?*, p. 59 [Kindle Edition].

^{viii} *Ibid.*, p. 55.

^{ix} Amy-Jill Levine in *The Misunderstood Jew*, p. 19.

^x My translation.

^{xi} See Exodus 21:37a; Exodus 22:1, 3-4; Leviticus 6:5; Numbers 5:7; II Samuel 12:6.

^{xii} Matthew 6:2-4 [The Message].

^{xiii} Fernando Sabino in III – O Escolhido , published in the book “O Encontro Marcado,” p. 65 [my translation].

^{xiv} Brian D. McLaren in Do I Stay Christian?, p. 59 [Kindle Edition].