

Pentecost 24 (26C)
October 30, 2016
Trinity Parish, Seattle

[Isaiah 1:10-18](#)

[Psalm 32:1-8](#)

[2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12](#)

[Luke 19:1-10](#)

I still can't hear the story of Zaccheus without having a flashback to when I was about five years old and hearing my grandmother teach me a little song. I don't know why this one stuck with me, but it did:

Zaccheus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he.
He climbed up in a sycamore tree for the Lord to see.
And as the savior passed that way he looked up in the tree.
And he said, "Zaccheus, you come down! For I'm going to your house for tea."

Some things you just can't unlearn! But behind this little children's ditty is a pretty amazing story. It's a story of repentance and redemption.

Luke's gospel tells us that Zaccheus was not just a tax collector, but a chief tax collector. Now that's not like the head of the IRS. It's more like the head of a syndicated crime mob. Tax collectors were gangsters, professional extortionists who preyed upon the little people, squeezing them for their tribute. And then they took their cut and then payed their bosses off on up to the top. It was a pyramid scheme with the Roman Emperor at the top. It was the way the empire funded itself. Tax collectors were hated. They didn't like being hated, but they did

like getting rich, and that was the thing that motivated them. Luke says Zaccheus was a chief tax collector, and he was *rich*.

Jesus was passing through Jericho where Zaccheus lived, and he walked by a tree, looked up, and there was Zaccheus, who being small of stature had gone up for a ring-side seat. It may also be the case that being a very much disliked person, he could be a bit out of sight up there. But Jesus stopped, noticed him, and said, “Zaccheus, hurry and come down. I’d like to come to your house today.”

Imagine his surprise. And not only his surprise, but the surprise of all who saw it happening. They started grumbling and complaining: “Jesus is going to the house of a sinner! That scoundrel, Zaccheus!”

Hearing all of this, Zaccheus stood before Jesus and said, “Look, Lord, I’m going to give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay it back four times as much.” I’m pretty sure that he had defrauded a few people. And I think he knew that. But the “if I have defrauded anyone” lets him save face just a bit, and not totally lose his dignity.

And he promises not just to tithe ten percent of his income, but half of all his possessions. And not simply to repay with interest all he had taken dishonestly, but to restore it four-fold.

Zaccheus – recognized, called by name, and invited into fellowship – had an instant change of heart. Jesus was the manifestation of God’s unrelenting search for the least, the lowest, and the lost, and hearing Jesus call him by name had a transforming effect on him. And the poor benefitted from it. And those who had been taken advantage of were made whole, and more.

Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house.”

Yes, it all sounds just a little too simple. But the point is that we should never give up on the hated, the depraved, the pariahs of society – the lost ones! We shouldn't, because God hasn't.

We often think of repentance and redemption as things that pertain primarily to individual guilt and sin. And as individuals we all certainly stand in need of them. The General Confession in our Eucharistic liturgy is an acknowledgement of our continual need for repentance and amendment of life, and for our continual turning toward God from the things that distract us and draw us away from the way of love.

But repentance and redemption apply also to nations and groups of people. In fact, throughout the Hebrew scriptures, the prophets were continually calling Israel to repent – as a whole people, a nation that had drifted from its truest calling. In today's reading from the Prophet Isaiah, we hear God calling the rulers and people of Sodom and Gomorrah back to God. God had grown weary of their sacrifices, their pretenses to religion, their incense and their offerings and solemn assemblies and their seasonal festivals. What God really wanted was their adherence to justice, and care for the oppressed, and the defense of the orphans and widows. Turning, in repentance, was Isaiah's call to the whole people. Sin is not just individual. It is often, if not mostly, corporate – the habits we develop as a people, and even as a nation.

I have been reminded these past weeks of one of the grave sins of our nation in how we have treated and continue to treat our native brothers and sisters. We have a long and sad history first of all of the deliberate extermination of native peoples, which we now call genocide. And the centuries of injustice regarding ethnic cleansing and forced movements of people onto reservations, and the violation of treaties when it was convenient for the purposes of the white majority. We're faced with another chapter in this long and sad history in North Dakota over the Dakota Access Pipeline. Oil companies want to build a

pipeline across protected native lands. The Dakota Sioux along with 300 other tribes who have joined them are protesting the construction of this pipeline under the Missouri River, their primary access to clean water.

The protests, which have been peaceful, led to violence by police and National Guard troops this week, with the use of pepper spray and rubber bullets and the arrest of 143 people. Just a few weeks ago our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, went to Standing Rock to stand alongside the Sioux people in solidarity with their desire to both care for the integrity of creation and to have their rights as native tribes and as human beings respected and protected. In his inspired talk to the crowds, Bishop Curry likened what is going on at Standing Rock to the events in Selma, Alabama, during the Civil Rights Movement, and called this the New Selma. It was a call to action for our church and all people of good will.

As we look at what is going on at Standing Rock, I think we would be dishonest if we didn't think this has to do with race, our greatest national sin. The contrast between how this occupation is being treated and the occupation of federal lands in Oregon by a group of white, heavily armed, mostly men earlier this year could not be more stark. The Oregon occupiers of the Malheur land and federal offices brought wall to wall coverage on all the major news media for over a month – followed by their acquittal on all charges before an all-white jury of their peers this past week. By comparison, the peaceful, unarmed protesters at Standing Rock number in the thousands, but major news media have virtually ignored it, even while the assault on it from the government rises to new levels of violence. The levels of frustration from native peoples and their supporters from around the country are growing.

We had a choice today in our lectionary between the reading from Isaiah and one from the prophet Habakkuk, which, given the developments over the past few days might have had even more resonance. Think about those protesters at Standing Rock as we hear the words of Habakkuk:

O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not listen?

Or cry to you "Violence!"
and you will not save?

Why do you make me see wrong-doing
and look at trouble?

Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.

So the law becomes slack
and justice never prevails.

The wicked surround the righteous--
therefore judgment comes forth perverted.

I will stand at my watchpost,
and station myself on the rampart;

I will keep watch to see what he will say to me,
and what he will answer concerning my complaint.

Then the LORD answered me and said:

Write the vision;
make it plain on tablets,
so that a runner may read it.

For there is still a vision for the appointed time;
it speaks of the end, and does not lie.

If it seems to tarry, wait for it;
it will surely come, it will not delay.

Look at the proud!

Their spirit is not right in them,
but the righteous live by their faith.

Habakkuk's lament and that of the native people in our land will only grow more pronounced until we deal as a nation with the sins of our past, sins that continue to play themselves out in the racial injustices of our own time. I'm glad to say that our church takes this kind of collective sin as seriously as we do the sins of individuals, and that we preach repentance and redemption for ourselves as a nation just as clearly as we do for each one of us. It takes a commitment by all of us to live more deeply into our baptismal promises to love our neighbor as ourselves, and to respect the dignity of every human being. These are the things we must care about and to which we must commit ourselves, by using our voices, and our votes, and if necessary our bodies, just as those people of faith who joined hand in hand to help bring about voting rights through their protests in Selma and across the South did now over 50 years ago.

The little story of Zaccheus contains a message of promise and of hope for us. Yes, even the most guilty, the most unseemly, the most despicable sinner can find repentance and redemption. God has not given up on any of us. God is always calling to us from a future where the dream of God for the kind of community we should become is a reality. Along the way we need to learn and grow. We need to take our wrongs and make them right. We need to turn and go in a new direction. That is what repentance means.

Jesus transformed Zaccheus' sin into justice for those who had been oppressed, and into good news for the poor. He wants to do no less for us, yes both as individuals and as a nation. He is calling us by name, and he wants to come to our house for tea.