

“CALLED BY LOVE”
A Sermon Preached at
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(transcribed from audio file)

Our scripture this morning comes from Luke 19:1-10.

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. 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.” So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” 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.” Then Jesus said to him, “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.” NRSVue

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Zacchaeus is a lot easier to say than to spell and the good news is you can't see my notes, and you can't see how many ways I misspelled it. After a while I just gave up trying to fix it.

Recently I got lost in Barnes & Noble. You see, for me gift giving is a serious sport, and I have a friend who's 12-year-old was turning 13 and he is a voracious reader. It's become a bit of a tradition that I buy him the best book for his birthday. So, of course, there's no pressure at all. I normally order online, but I left it to the last minute to get his present, and so, off to Barnes & Noble I went. I can't remember the last time I've been to Barnes & Noble. Not because I don't read, but I have a Kindle and so my books are mostly digital. Despite it being about a year since I've been to Barnes & Noble I thought they would have a section of new releases for his

age group and I thought I knew where it would be. The trick about being this type of gift giver is I have to find a good book, but if it's an older book, the chances that he has read it already are pretty high because of how much he reads. So, not only do I have to find the best book, I need to find recent publications, so I know he hasn't already read it.

So, I immediately head to the children's section of Barnes & Noble when I got there and I felt lost. I wondered around. I looked for a sign that said, "New Releases", or "Recently Published" in his age group. Couldn't find anything. So, I thought, well maybe they have table displays outside the children's section. Maybe I'll go over here. Nope!

So, finally I gave up and headed to the front counter and asked them if there was someone who could help me. And there was. An employee graciously headed back to the children's section with me and then I explained what I was looking for – all the parameters. Thirteen-year-old. Reads a ton. Was into spy books and it has to be really new, so he hasn't read it yet. So, after I told her all my parameters, she led me to an entirely different section of the store where there was New Releases for young readers, which is his age category. I realized after she talked me through her suggestions and showed me this entire bookshelf full of books I was looking for, that they did have what I was looking for. I was just in the wrong section.

In this Luke passage, Jesus says he came to seek out and save the lost. Often we assume this to be a lost soul, someone who has been damned or condemned. We put a lot of negativity into that.

But in the New Testament that word lost really just means in the wrong place. Not condemned, but just in the wrong place. We have all been in the wrong place at some point in our lives whether it is in Barnes & Noble or in the Mall, on a road trip. I'm geographically challenged; it happens to me all the time. But we also get lost in the trajectory of our lives as well, focused on the wrong things, in the wrong place. Lost.

Zacchaeus was a bit lost. He was a chief tax collector and the people of his day lumped tax collectors in with robbers and murderers – in the same category, robbers, tax collectors and murderers. Pretty intense. And yet Jesus calls Zacchaeus by name, probably knew how to spell it, and he goes to his house to eat dinner with him and declares him a son of Abraham which is kind of like saying, you're part of the family.

When we end up in the wrong place God calls to us in love and when we respond to God's love, it can be transformational.

In the 1930's wallpaper was really popular, but it was actual paper, and houses were heated with coal. It was also popular. That's how they predominantly heated houses. Well, when you heat a house with coal, things get sooty. They get dirty and there was a layer of soot that accumulates on things, including your walls and your wallpaper. So, a puttylike substance was created back in the day to clean the coal residue off the wallpaper in the 1930s.

Eventually in the 1940s homes became heated by natural gas and vinyl wallpaper became more popular which is a lot easier to clean with soap and water. So, the company that made this cleaning putty, their products didn't really have a purpose anymore. It got close to bankruptcy and then they learned that teachers were using this wallpaper cleaner putty for art projects and so the company repurposed it to a child's toy. It became Play Doh. I didn't know that story. I thought that was really cool. So, from a cleaning product, wallpaper cleaning product, to a child's toy – Play Doh. From a lump of useless dough to something that has brought joy to so many over the years. Teachers and parents alike. It has kept kids occupied for hours at a time.

Zacchaeus was transformed by God's grace, just like Play Doh. He had committed fraud. He'd done a bunch of stuff that wasn't so good and then he even admits to doing those things. He says, if I have defrauded anyone, which means I have, I will pay back four times as much. Then after he is called by Jesus, called by love, and transformed by God's grace, Zacchaeus' life becomes a blessing to so many. Right? He gives half of his possessions to the poor. That's a lot of people blessed by that and he gives back four times what he took. That's a lot of money. He goes from stealing to blessing people and being generous financially. His life has been repurposed and a blessing to many. Just like Play Doh.

God has a history in the Bible. We see this in the Bible and throughout time. God has a history of repurposing people. Calling people who are lost and giving them a new purpose to bless many. We see this in the saints that have gone before us. We see this in Jacob, Joseph, Esther, Jonah and Ruth, the woman at the well, Zacchaeus, you, me.

The good news in our passage this morning is that even those who are lost are called by God in love and then transformed by God's grace. A favor of kindness that we

don't deserve, but are still given. And the transformation that we go through in responding to God's love has the potential to be a blessing to so many people.

So, my question for you this morning is, where are you at? Because we're not all at the same place in our journey. Maybe you're like early Zacchaeus, lost and in the wrong place. Maybe you're like Zacchaeus in the tree. You hear God calling to you. Are you going to listen? Maybe you're like Zacchaeus after Jesus calls to him and you are being transformed and repurposed to be a blessing to many.

Wherever you may be in your journey, I encourage you to take a step forward this week, whether it's a step out of the wrong place, whether it's a step toward listening to God's call, or whether it's a step to being a blessing to others. I encourage you to not remain still wherever you are.

God's love is what calls to us and the transformation that can happen is really a beautiful thing. And I have one last food for thought for you.

When I was researching this passage there was a commentary that made a really interesting point. Zacchaeus is not the only one that is lost. His community was missing an important member. Right? They've lumped him in with robbers and murderers. They've written him off and through Jesus calling Zacchaeus, naming him a son of Abraham, which is basically saying he's part of the family. He's in. Zacchaeus is saved and the community is transformed as well by his presence, by his inclusion into that community through his generous giving. Right? He blesses the entire community.

So, I say that because sometimes we get caught up in our own individual stories and I want to encourage you to remember that just by one person responding to God's call, an entire community can be transformed and blessed.

Amen? Amen.