

Transformed: Zacchaeus

Rev. Cameron D St.Michael –February 2 2024

4th Sunday after Epiphany

Readings: Deuteronomy 15:7-11; 2 Corinthians 8:9-15; Luke 19:1-10 CEB

Reflection: Psalm 69

Greeting: Praise the Lord! Those who honor the Lord, who adore God’s commandments, are truly happy! They shine in the dark for others who do right. They are merciful, compassionate, and righteous. Those who lend generously are good people as are those who conduct their affairs with justice. They give freely to those in need. Their righteousness stands forever. Their strength increases gloriously. (Psalm 112)

Prayer: Precious Lord, we have seen the way that you can change hearts and lives through your steadfast love and faithfulness. May you help us to remember the transformation we see in the lives that you have touched. That we may remember the faithfulness of your servant Zacchaeus and the way that you changed his outlook as you changed the world. Grant that we may know your peace and grace so that we may share it with others. May you lift our hearts in worship so that we may sing your praises and glorify your name. Help us to reach out to one another this day so that we may love our neighbor as ourselves as we further devote ourselves to loving you, O God. May you prepare us so that we may be transformed and call others to a life that is changed through walking with Jesus Christ, our Lord and friend. And it is in his name that we pray this day. Amen.

Reflection: Psalm 69

³⁰ I will praise God’s name with song; I will magnify him with thanks ³¹ because that is more pleasing to the Lord than an ox, more pleasing than a young bull with full horns and hooves. ³² Let the afflicted see it and be glad! You who seek God— let your hearts beat strong again ³³ because the Lord listens to the needy and doesn’t despise his captives. ³⁴ Let heaven and earth praise God, the oceans too, and all that moves within them! ³⁵ God will most certainly save Zion and will rebuild Judah’s cities so that God’s servants can live there and possess it. ³⁶ The offspring of God’s servants will inherit Zion, and those who love God’s name will dwell there. (Psalm 69:30-36 CEB+)

We read the words of Psalm 69, and we hear of God’s salvation. That God gives hope to those who are in need. That we may sing the praises of the Lord because of the good that has been promised to his children. That just as Zacchaeus promises to help those in need, we too can be generous in the Lord. How have you had your own life transformed by the love of Christ? How can you invite others to have their hearts and lives changed by following our Savior? Who will you lift up in your prayers this week? Who is it that you can help through the love of Christ?

Prayer: Eternal God, we thank you for always being there for us. That you are with us in the good and the bad, in the easy and the difficult. We are grateful that you are with us in all that we are and all that we do. Today we remember the promise you made when you transformed Zacchaeus through love and compassion. May we remember the many blessings that you have shown to your people. We come before you in prayer this day lifting up the many joys and concerns that we have. We lift up our celebrations that we may celebrate them with you. We lift up our sorrows so that we may find comfort in your presence. We come together to share the prayers that we have lifted up aloud together. But we also lift up the unspoken prayers that we hold in our hearts. For we know that you hear every prayer that we lift up to you. May you strengthen us in the prayers we speak and the silent pleadings from within. May we know you are there in both our laughter and our tears. May we remember you in our dancing and our mourning. For you are always with us, Lord. May we experience your great love that transforms lives. May we love ever deeper because you are with us. And may we always celebrate Jesus Christ, our steadfast friend and Savior. Amen.

Now let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Sermon:

Our scripture readings for today come from the Common English Bible. Our first reading is from Deuteronomy chapter 15, verses 7 through 11.

⁷ Now if there are some poor persons among you, say one of your fellow Israelites in one of your cities in the land that the Lord your God is giving you, don't be hard-hearted or tightfisted toward your poor fellow Israelites. ⁸ To the contrary! Open your hand wide to them. You must generously lend them whatever they need. ⁹ But watch yourself! Make sure no wicked thought crosses your mind, such as, The seventh year is coming—the year of debt cancellation—so that you resent your poor fellow Israelites and don't give them anything. If you do that, they will cry out to the Lord against you, and you will be guilty of sin. ¹⁰ No, give generously to needy persons. Don't resent giving to them because it is this very thing that will lead to the Lord your God's blessing you in all you do and work at. ¹¹ Poor persons will never disappear from the earth. That's why I'm giving you this command: you must open your hand generously to your fellow Israelites, to the needy among you, and to the poor who live with you in your land. (Deuteronomy 15:7-11 CEB+)

Our next reading is from 2 Corinthians chapter 8, verse 9 through 15.

⁹ You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Although he was rich, he became poor for your sakes, so that you could become rich through his poverty. ¹⁰ I'm giving you my opinion about this. It's to your advantage to do this, since you not only started to do it last year but you wanted to do it too. ¹¹ Now finish the job as well so that you finish it with as much enthusiasm as you started, given what you can afford. ¹² A gift is appreciated because of

what a person can afford, not because of what that person can't afford, if it's apparent that it's done willingly. ¹³It isn't that we want others to have financial ease and you financial difficulties, but it's a matter of equality. ¹⁴At the present moment, your surplus can fill their deficit so that in the future their surplus can fill your deficit. In this way there is equality. ¹⁵As it is written, The one who gathered more didn't have too much, and the one who gathered less didn't have too little. (2 Corinthians 8:9-15 CEB+)

Our final reading is from Luke chapter 19, verse 1 through 10.

¹ Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through town. ²A man there named Zacchaeus, a ruler among tax collectors, was rich. ³He was trying to see who Jesus was, but, being a short man, he couldn't because of the crowd. ⁴So he ran ahead and climbed up a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus, who was about to pass that way. ⁵When Jesus came to that spot, he looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, come down at once. I must stay in your home today." ⁶So Zacchaeus came down at once, happy to welcome Jesus. ⁷Everyone who saw this grumbled, saying, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner." ⁸Zacchaeus stopped and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord, I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone, I repay them four times as much." ⁹Jesus said to him, "Today, salvation has come to this household because he too is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰The Human One came to seek and save the lost." (Luke 19:1-10 CEB+)

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Our third entry for our transformed series is Zacchaeus. He is our first entry from the New Testament. Many people will know Zacchaeus from the Sunday school song about him being a wee little man. But that is usually about as far as their knowledge goes. I wanted to look at Zacchaeus because he has a very fascinating change that takes place here. It can be easy to miss because of the way things are worded. But I wanted to include him because Zacchaeus gives us a look at a voluntary transformation because of an interaction with Christ. And I felt that that was a rather interesting thing to have because we saw God approaching and offering change in our last two messages. But this time we see a change simply as a response to Christ.

I wanted to begin with a brief overview of what happens to Zacchaeus. Jesus has entered Jericho and Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus. He's interested in finding out who this man is that everyone's been talking about. The problem is that Zacchaeus is a short man, and he cannot see over the crowds. But he will not let that get in the way of him seeing Jesus. So, he climbs up into a tree, knowing that Jesus is passing that way, and figures that up there he can see what's going to happen. And then something does happen. Jesus gets there and he stops. He tells Zacchaeus to come down because he must stay at his house. Now this is a bit of a command. Not, "I want to stay at your house", but he must. I believe that must is because of what's about to happen. Zacchaeus hurries down, and he's excited. He's excited that Jesus picked him. That with all the things that could have happened, Jesus picks Zacchaeus of all people. Now that may sit well with Zacchaeus, but it does not sit well with everyone else

around, because he's a tax collector. And not just any tax collector. He's the chief tax collector. A wealthy tax collector. And so, there's grumbling. Grumbling that Jesus is going to go and dine with a sinner. That he is staying with this man and must then agree with everything he does. Now this is where our transformation happens. And it can be easy to miss because different translations word this differently because the Greek is a little awkward for how we would read this. But Zacchaeus responds that he gives half his possessions to the poor, and that if he cheats anyone, he repays them four times as much. Now the transformation is that this is a response to Jesus, what he will do going forward. Not so much that he is defending what he is already doing but declaring what his position is going forward. There is a lot to dive into with how a conversation in Aramaic would get translated into Greek, but I read this as a declaration of how Zacchaeus is going to live from now on. That is a response to Jesus saying that he wants to stay with him. Zacchaeus says that half of everything he has will go to the poor, and that he will always repay four times as much if he cheats someone. Which is pretty big. And Jesus says that salvation has come to this household, because the human one came to seek and save the lost. And so, the reason I view this as a transformation of Zacchaeus's heart is because Jesus notes his salvation, and that he was lost. That his words to Christ are a sign of his change.

I included some other readings to give us some background on the importance of what Zacchaeus is offering to do here. Because our reading from Deuteronomy gives us a look at what the Old Testament law was in regard to this. That people should be generous. That if someone is in need, people should give. That instead of resenting the poor among you, you should give to support the poor among you. And that people should give generously. There was a line in this that reminded me of Zacchaeus. "Don't resent giving to them, because it is this very thing that will lead to the Lord your God's blessing you in all you do and work at." And that is exactly what happens with Zacchaeus. Now there's a line here that I have seen interpreted in completely the opposite way than it's intended. That the poor will never disappear from the earth. And sometimes people take that to mean that if there's always going to be poor, that we don't have to do anything because the poor will always exist. What this verse says is quite the opposite. That because there will always be poor, you should always have your hand open to give generously. That giving is part of our response to God. And it is a way that God transforms our hearts by making us want to generously give.

We hear that from Paul in his second letter to the church in Corinth. That just as Christ became poor for our sakes so that we could become rich through his poverty, that we give knowing that we give generously because of Christ. A gift is appreciated because of what a person can afford, if it is done willingly. That when we give generously, and we do so not out of obligation, but because we want to do the right thing, it is a sign that our hearts have been changed in Christ. And there is this idea of all of us sharing together. That one person's surplus fills another's deficit, so that in the future, if we have a deficit, someone else's surplus will fill it. That we do not view some as better than others, but we view all equally. And this is the idea that we're getting in this transformation of Zacchaeus.

Because Zacchaeus comes down and gets chosen, and it doesn't go to his head thinking that he must be the best. He responds to show how much it has impacted him. He will give away half of what he has, and he will repay anyone he cheats. He does not want to be seen as somebody who does not do the right thing. He does not want to be defined by his role as a tax collector, but by what he himself does. And this is an important thing to note, because we could simply judge him based on his role as tax collector and toss him to the side. Just as everyone else there was judging him because he was a wealthy tax collector. But Jesus sees his potential. Jesus sees how much he is willing to give, and he gives. Jesus sees how much he is willing to take responsibility for his own actions, and Jesus calls him saved. The thing is, is that when we think about the lost, sometimes it's way too easy for us to judge based on why they're lost, and not how they can be found. It is all too easy for us to look at someone and say, "well they're lost so I can give up on them." Whereas the response that Christ has is that they're lost so he's going to take time and be with them. Jesus is going to take time to let his presence be felt in their life, because he thinks they can change. That potential for change is a very important part of who we are and what we do. It is a very important part of our life in Christ, because our potential to change is what allows us to respond to the invitation that we find through grace. That we are not predestined to be chosen or not chosen, that we are not predestined to either be worthy or unworthy, that some are not permanently lost and some permanently saved, but all are capable of being saved. Our role in Christ is to give them a chance, because sometimes that's all we need.

We see that with Zacchaeus. His life is transformed because he was given a chance to respond to Christ. He was given a chance to change, all because Christ showed compassion. I want us to reflect on that idea that Christ offered Zacchaeus compassion and Zacchaeus accepted and it transformed his life. Voluntarily, Zacchaeus offers up what he has as a gift and volunteers to do more than what is asked so that he can be seen as who he is, who he wants to be in Christ. It's important for us to note that Zacchaeus does this willingly, that his heart and his life are changed as a response to Christ, just as we can respond to Christ, just as we can invite others to respond in Christ. But Jesus doesn't do this by berating him. Jesus doesn't do this by pulling him down. Jesus does this by standing by someone who is judged, standing by someone who is already viewed as unworthy. Jesus aligns himself with the least and the last, with the outcast, because Jesus came to seek and save the lost. So let us remember the example set by our Savior and let us remember the transformation that we see in Zacchaeus with the way that people can respond to Christ. Let us offer the love and the compassion that Christ has to all people, that all may respond. And may we always look at the way that we can say yes through faith to having our own hearts and our own lives transformed by the love of God through living a life in Jesus Christ our Lord. And may we always accept the invitation from Christ to have our own lives be transformed. Amen.

Prayer of Confession and Pardon: God, you are with us even when we turn away from you. Guide us back into your loving arms. Judge us not by the perfection of our actions but show us mercy and love. We have strayed like lost sheep from your ways, failing both in what we have done and what we have failed to do. Bring us back into your fold that you may guide us and

lead us in all things. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us and forgive us. May we walk in your love and trust your ways. Amen.

Almighty God have mercy upon you. May the Lord forgive all your sins and lift you up in love through Jesus Christ our Lord, and by the Holy Spirit keep you in life eternal. Amen.

Offering: If you are so moved to make an offering, you may send it to the church treasurer, or you may send it to the PO Box listed below. We are still the church, and the church still needs your support to keep doing all the important work that we do.

Lord's Prayer

Dismissal with Blessing: May we go forth reflecting God's love in our lives as we go forth in the peace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Current Series – Transformed

This series is a 7-week series about transformation. Each week will look at a different person from the Bible that was transformed by God. Each one tells a unique story about God's love and grace that are there for all people. Each person's tale of transformation gives us insight into how God can heal our brokenness. And each gives us hope that we may all be Transformed through a life in Jesus Christ.

1/19: Abraham & Sarah 1/26: Jacob 2/2: Zacchaeus 2/9: Paul

2/16: Moses 2/23: Elijah 3/2: Jesus

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Toledo UMC

Madison & Ohio St
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Worship 8:15am

Etna UMC

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