

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Oct 30th 2016

What is really going on here in the charming encounter between Jesus and the wealthy head tax collector, Zacchaeus? Is Jesus defending a rich guy who has been wrongly maligned by his neighbors? Or is Jesus inviting himself to dinner to create the occasion for a sinner to be converted from his wicked ways? Some commentators understand Jesus' action to be a defense of a misunderstood tax collector because they take Zacchaeus's words to be a defense of his way of life; since the Greek text of his words is actually in the present tense, they take it as a description of his way of life. To paraphrase what he says in the Greek, "I (regularly) give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I happen to extort somebody, I make it up fourfold." Taken that way, the words imply behavior that is impossible. One cannot routinely give half of one's possessions (e.g. 320 acres today, 260 tomorrow, 130 the next . . . which would lead to total divestment within a week!). As for regularly repaying fourfold for extortions, that implies the behavior of regularly extorting and then making it up with abundant restoration—and unlikely lifestyle indeed! No, the New American Bible translators have interpreted the present-tense verbs more sensibly--that is, in the way people use the present-tense to express a resolve—as in, "I'm giving up smoking."

This interpretation is confirmed in Jesus' words, "Today salvation has come to this house because this man too is a descendant of Abraham. For the Son of Man has come to seek and save what was lost." Yes! Zacchaeus had been using his position as chief tax collector to exploit people; and his encounter with Jesus in this moment of hosting him in his home, has led to a profound change of heart, conversion. And how was he so easily led to this conversion? The tipoff was his surprising readiness to climb a tree to "see Jesus, who he is" (to translate literally). This is strikingly childlike behavior for a figure of some power in his town.

But Luke has provided a context for us to understand this properly. In his Gospel, we have just read in the prior chapter that "whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it (18:17). Then we read about a rich official who is blinded by his wealth, and finds himself unready to follow Jesus. Then Jesus heals a blind beggar who knows that he needs healing. Finally, in the story about Zacchaeus we meet another kind of rich man, one who is sufficiently childlike to scamper up a tree to see who Jesus is. His openness to the truth makes him ready to be healed of his blindness regarding his greed and his readiness to exploit others.

This Gospel account calls us all to seek the truth with childlike openness, so that we are ready to encounter the Lord Jesus and respond to his surprising initiatives in our lives. He might invite himself to dinner.

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