

“Zacchaeus: A Transformed Witness”

Luke 19:1-10

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Jesus' ministry was all about 'transformation' for his people and this world. When we were still away from God, our compassionate God loved us and sent His only son for our salvation. Yet, salvation will not happen to us without our desperate eagerness and active response to God's grace. We Methodists believe in three stages of Grace, God's prevenient (preparing) Grace, justifying (accepting) grace and sanctifying (sustaining) grace: Do you remember a picture that Jesus is standing at the door with a lamp, but the door doesn't have a door knob? That picture explains well about prevenient grace. Prevenient grace (preparation for Grace) means that Jesus Christ comes before us to save us, but He can't come in our heart unless we open the door and let him in.

Have you ever experienced any 'transformational experience' in your life? What really did change - you or your life? I read David Saucier's story which is a great example of a life transformation.

David Saucier was a former patient at Methodist Hospital in Houston. As a matter of fact, he was the fourth patient at the Methodist Hospital to receive a heart transplant. He published an essay, and it's entitled "Number Four is Still Alive." He writes:

“Many people have asked me if I feel any different, or if I act any different, if the transplant has changed my life in any way. I can answer that in three ways: First, there's urgency. I live with a renewed sense of urgency, and that has changed my priorities because I realize that if I'm to stop and smell the roses, I had best do it now. Second, there is gratitude. I don't understand this miracle that has happened within me with my new heart. All I can do is accept and feel grateful for each additional day I live. A third change is that I now walk a little closer to God because when you've been through a harrowing experience with someone, you form a special bond with them. Recovering from the transplant was at times a harrowing experience, and I guarantee you that I clung to God for dear life during those times. He was the good friend who saw me through,

sometimes the only one who thoroughly understood. I'm grateful that He was there for me.”

Then David Saucier concludes his essay with these powerful words:

“Deep down inside I know that God will always take care of me. I also know that no one lives forever and that someday He'll decide He can better care for me on the other side of the Jordan, but until that time, Number Four is still alive and enjoying every minute of it.”

Here is another life-changing story from our reading. His name is Zacchaeus. He was the chief tax collector for the Roman government in this city, Jericho, but as we know, very possibly, he was the most despised man in Jericho because he had accumulated his wealth exploiting his own people. The city of Jericho was the customs station, and thousands of Jews came through there and they had paid poll taxes for every cow, calf, and camel that came through customs. A cart, for instance, could be taxed for each wheel, for the animal that pulled it, and for the merchandise that it carried. Imagine how much he could take advantage of his people in this way. Researchers tell us that *two or three million people* showed up for the Passover. Ironically, Zacchaeus's name meant "the pure one" and "the righteous," but the mention of his name evoked disgust.

Have you ever thought about this question: Zacchaeus was a hated man in the city and was regarded as a traitor to his own people, so how come Jesus called him and had a meal with him in his house? What touched Jesus' heart? Let's revisit our reading again:

One day, Zacchaeus heard that Jesus was coming to his town. He really wanted to see him. Even though people despised him, he had his own wounded heart and story that he wanted to share. No one else tried to hear him. He was abandoned, isolated and excluded, so there was no place to belong to nor a person to share with him. He was desperately starving for relationship and meaningful encounters because he longed for a change of his life and transformation.

Secondly, even though he was weak and complex, he had the courage to overcome it. He was the collectors' boss, but he didn't care about others' eyes as long as he could see Jesus even from a distance. Furthermore, since he was a short man, he couldn't see Jesus from the crowd. He didn't give up; rather, he climbed up a sycamore tree. Sycamore tree was the big shade tree. It is like a fig

tree but taller; some 50 to 75 feet tall and some 50 feet wide. It was a perfect place to hide and to watch. We all have weakness and shortcomings and complexities that we want to hide, but God didn't care about them. Look at Jesus' disciples: They were not perfect or bright people. They couldn't always understand Jesus' vision and teaching. But God transformed them into the best people for His mission. God always lifted up the weak made them strong for his ministry. Jacob was a liar. Noah was a drunk and even Moses was a good speaker at first. I am not a great golfer, but I heard a story why golf balls have dimples: Originally golf balls were smooth, but golfers found out if there were nicks, bumps and slices in the cover, they could fly farther. God transforms our disadvantages and weakness into His success.

Finally, Zacchaeus was humbled to accept Jesus as his Savior. A real transformation will not happen at a great lecture, but a moment of conversation and a trustworthy relationship to open up our heart to others in trust. We all want a change and transformation for ourselves. God is desperately looking for us, calling our names like Zacchaeus. He asks us, "How are you? I have been looking for you. What is happening?" Our God is not passive God who waited for us. When we are ready and open to God's love, we will realize that God is already there in your heart.

One of our church members shared a moving story with me:

Father John Powell, a professor at Loyola University in Chicago, writes about a student in his Theology of Faith class named Tommy:

"Tommy was an "atheist in residence" in his Theology of Faith course. He constantly objected to the possibility of an unconditionally loving Father/God. At the end of the course, he asked in a cynical tone, "Do you think I'll ever find God?" I said, "Tommy! I don't think you'll ever find Him, but I am absolutely certain that He will find you!" He shrugged a little and left his class.

Later I heard that Tommy had terminal cancer. He came to see me. "Tommy, I've thought about you so often; I hear you are sick," "Oh, yes, very sick. I have cancer in both lungs. It's a matter of weeks." "Can you talk about it, Tom?"

When the doctors removed a lump from my groin and told me that it was malignant, that's when I got serious about locating God. And when the malignancy spread into my vital organs, I really began banging bloody fists

against the bronze doors of heaven. But God did not come out. In fact, nothing happened.

"Well, I decided that I didn't really care about God, about an afterlife, or anything like that. I decided to spend what time I had left doing something more profitable. I thought about you and your class and I remembered something else you had said: 'The essential sadness is to go through life without loving. But it would be almost equally sad to go through life and leave this world without ever telling those you loved that you had loved them.'

"So, I began with the hardest one, my Dad. He was reading the newspaper when I approached him. 'Yes, what?' he asked without lowering the newspaper. 'Dad, I would like to talk with you.' 'Well, talk. I mean. It's really important.' The newspaper came down three slow inches. 'What is it?' 'Dad, I love you, I just wanted you to know that.' 'The newspaper fluttered to the floor. Then my father did two things I could never remember him ever doing before. He cried and he hugged me. We talked all night, even though he had to go to work the next morning.'

"Then, one day I turned around and realized that God was there. He found me!"

Zacchaeus opened his heart and received Jesus Christ not only to his house for a meal, but he also received him as Savior for transformation for himself and his life. Something in that encounter with Jesus changed the way Zacchaeus saw the world. Zacchaeus became a changed man. He had made his living taking from others, but now he started giving away for others. He made two pledges: a donation of half of his possessions to the city and payment back four times if he has stolen someone's money. All great changes started by opening his heart to God.

Paul Scherer, in describing this story, says that this meeting with Jesus "redeemed Zacchaeus' past, it transformed his present, and it re-directed his future." Isn't that what God wants to do with all of us? Do you want to redeem your past, transform your present and re-direction of your future? God's grace is already **before** you. Just open your door and welcome him in your heart. Then your life will be transformed into a beautiful place with the grace of God. Amen.