

What Change Looks Like
A sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – October 30, 2022

Please Read:
Isaiah 1:10-18
Luke 19:1-10

Rishi Sunak, after Liz Truss's shortest term as the Prime Minister of England, has been chosen to lead Britain's Conservative Party and as of Tuesday became Great Britain's Prime Minister. His election is notable, in that he is the first person of color to become prime minister in British history, the youngest PM in 200 years, the first Hindu PM ever, as well as the richest man ever to hold the office. I'm guessing this may have had something to do with his election. Formerly, Mr. Sunak was the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the country's chief financial minister and basically in charge of tax collection for the country.

Zacchaeus was also a wealthy man and tax collector. Today's gospel text is well-loved, and one of the most beautiful stories of dramatic change. While some of you may have learned as a child the story of little Zacchaeus, the wee little man in the sycamore tree, be quite sure that this is a story for adults. It's also a story that is appropriate for today as we remember the Reformation, that tumultuous period in the 16th century when the Catholic church and indeed western society underwent one of the greatest changes in history. Zacchaeus' experience can help us to better understand reformation, individually and corporately. Jesus says salvation has come to Zacchaeus and his house, and tradition has it that Zacchaeus the Publican was the first bishop of Caesarea. It is an encouraging summary of the Lord's call for us to come down (humble ourselves), and how repentance leads to change that is both personal and social.

Zacchaeus wanted to "see" Jesus. He had curiosity, if not questions about who Jesus was. So, he climbed the Sycamore tree to take a look... What resulted from his seeking was a new revelation. As he tried to read Jesus, Jesus reads him and all the fine print of his life. Jesus speaks to him a word of grace and reveals to him how much God seeks to enter into our lives.

"Come down from the tree, Zacchaeus. I'm going home with you today," Jesus said. Zacchaeus had no reason to expect any attention from Jesus. He certainly had done nothing to deserve it. We know that tax collectors were hated by the general populace in first century Israel, but Zach is a "chief tax collector, and rich." That means he made a lot of money off the backs of his fellow countryman. If a vote had been taken, Zacchaeus would have been chosen the least likely to be befriended by Jesus. Yet Jesus

makes it a point to single out this man despite the grumbling that inevitably ensues from everybody else.

So, there are a few questions which you might reflect on from this text so far. First, are you curious about Jesus? Interested in discovering more of the mystery of this man? If so, are you willing to position yourself in a way that will allow you to see from a new perspective? And secondly, what does it mean for us to come down to be with the Lord? This is traditionally a call for penance, a call for humility. What do we need to come down from in order for us to better see, and to be in better communion with Christ?

Martin Luther told the story of his experience as a young student singing for bread in the streets of Mondeburg. It was not an uncommon way for poorer students to earn their keep. He remembered particularly a man who came running out of the house while they were singing and who jokingly cried out to them, "What are you boys up to with such a racket!" The man was smiling, and he had two sausages waving in his hands. Luther said he and the boy with him ran for all they were worth away from this man holding out his gift to them. And Luther asked, "Isn't that precisely what happens to us in our relation to God? All we imagine is the anger of God as judge, yelling out, "What are you up to with such a racket!" And tragically we never see the sausages and the smile... God like a man frantically waving sausages, holds out to us the Word of Jesus Christ seeking not to frighten, but to draw us to himself in love...

You see, Reformation Sunday is inextricably linked with Martin Luther because it was on October 31st that Luther nailed his 95 theses on the Wittenburg Schloss door. One of the great themes rediscovered in various reformations in the church is God's Word of grace to us. You and I need to remember that God's grace is sufficient for us. God's grace is sufficient for this church. God's grace is sufficient for whatever challenges lay ahead for us.

As we repent (or turn back to God or rethink our understanding of God) and allow God to reveal God's gracious provision for us, God then gives us freedom to change how we live. Make no mistake, when we receive Jesus into our lives as Lord, then our lives will be changed... Notice how Zacchaeus confesses Jesus, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone, I will pay back four times as much." Salvation comes to us personally, but it will always have social dimensions.

On the day of his encounter with Jesus, Zacchaeus was probably looking for something from Jesus, if nothing more than satisfying his own curiosity. I don't think he was anticipating giving half of his possessions to the poor or undergoing a complete revamping of his ethical standards to the extent that he would make a fourfold reimbursement in accordance with the Mosaic law to anyone whom he had cheated.

That is what happened, though. "Things changed" in Jericho that day because a powerful man in that town, Zacchaeus the tax collector, met Jesus. His life was radically changed. He became compassionate and generous. His encounter with the Lord allowed him not only to experience personal reconciliation with God, but public reconciliation with those neighbors whom he had either cheated or ignored.

As Zacchaeus is making his big speech, though, about how he's going to pay everyone back, Jesus says something strange. He says that salvation has come this house, because you also are "a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

When we undergo transformation and change in Christ, we might think we are pretty special... Yes, and no. We are indeed the object of God's love and affection, but on the other hand, who were the sons and daughters of Abraham? Israel, all those wayward sinners who proved their lostness time and again over the millennium. As John the Baptist told them, "Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father' as if your ancestry could get you in with God. "I tell you," says John, "God can raise up children out of the stones in the Jordan if need be."

Zacchaeus, as a "son of Abraham" clutching his new-found good works and noble virtues, will sink like a stone in the flood of God's judgment. And so will we. As Christians who are proud of our tradition of being *reformed and always reforming*, our only real claim to fame is that we are just one more sinner in the long history of God's preference for sinners, the history of God's grace... Jesus came to eat and drink with, to seek and to save the lost. Let's say it again - the lost. Little Zacchaeus, attempting to stand again on the ladder of his own goodness, to get up to God's level through his own means, is brought down up by a judge who loves to raise the dead, and to find the lost and to save the condemned, to eat and drink with sinners.

So, here's the final kicker in this story: Jesus said that he came to seek and to save the lost... Who does that include, really? I believe Jesus came to save the world! And so I just wonder if there's another challenging dimension to Reformation Sunday for us

in the church... Is God's sanctifying work limited to what we understand in the church? A clue may be an assertion Mark Bozzuti-Jones made while he was with us. "Remember that God is not a Christian!"

Billy Graham, at the 1987 Urbana missions conference, told about an experience he had visiting a Buddhist monastery in China. He saw one particular monk in deep meditation and felt led by the Spirit to go and tell him about Jesus. With his translator, Dr. Graham explained the way of salvation, giving the details about what Jesus had done on the cross and how giving one's life over to Christ would give a person eternal life.

Dr. Graham perceived that the monk was taking to heart all that he was saying, as there were tears in his eyes. And so, he asked the monk, "Are you willing to invite Jesus into your life right here and tight now as we pray together?"

But the monk looked back at him in dismay and said, "Accept him into my life? I would accept him, but you must understand that he is already in me. He has been in me for a long time. I didn't know all the things about him that you have just told me, but this Jesus that you have been telling me about is within me, and as you spoke, his Spirit within me was confirming everything that you said. I believe in what you said because his Spirit has convinced me that these things are true. I would accept him, except that he is already with me."

I guess we Christians need to recognize that perhaps the mystery of the dimensions of Christ's sanctifying work goes well beyond what our limited understanding can grasp, and that Christ's Spirit is at work in ways and in the lives of different saints that we may never know... Dr. Graham also once said, "My task is to bear witness to the Son. The Holy Spirit's task to convict. And it's God the Father's task to judge."

Like Zacchaeus, we are called by Christ to change, and making changes for a better life and fairer world for all... Like Zach, or Rishi, or Billy or the Buddhist Monk, may we come down and welcome the Lord's salvation to us this day...

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen!