

Exploring the Scriptures:
Coming to My House

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by Blair Odney

Luke 19:1-10

If you're new to Lynn Valley United Church you may not know that every Thursday at 3:30, a group gathers for coffee and conversation over at Waves Coffee just across from the library. Sometimes the conversation centers on our congregation's mission planning process. Sometimes the conversation challenges the text we'll be reading the following Sunday. Other times we'll have an intimate exchange about how we have experienced the Spirit working in our lives. It's always different and it's always lots of fun.

This week, the topic of conversation was the content of my blog, in which I got a little preachy about the case of Ohar Kahdr, the 23 year old Canadian who has been held at the Guantanamo Bay US Prisoner of War Camp in Cuba. After eight years of asserting his own innocence, Kahdr has pleaded guilty to all five charges against him. It was a plea bargain with the US military. The outcome? He'll serve one more year in Cuba and then be transported back to Canada, where he will be subject to Canadian parole law. Essentially, by pleading guilty, Kahdr avoids a trial and a conviction, with all the power stacked against him and gets to return to Canada and most likely freedom within two years.

Then we touched down ever so slightly on the case of Russell Williams, former commander of CFB Trenton in Ontario, who pleaded guilty to some 80 charges related to dozens of break and enters, as well as two counts of sexual assault and two counts of first-degree murder. You will have had to have been asleep to have missed the story all over the front page of every newspaper not to mention the endless follow up on talk shows on the depravity of sex crimes.

Then we turned our attention briefly to the case of Ivan Henry, the BC man who has been released from prison, having spent 27 years behind bars for crimes he did not commit. His first response, when questioned, was to focus on getting past being angry and live.

The conversation in Waves went the way a lot of conversations about justice go – good reasons why the Kahdr case might be considered a shameful debacle and good reasons to wonder whether Kahdr can ever be rehabilitated, given his upbringing. Conversations of justice go like this, don't they – someone presents a perspective about why a sinful criminal ought to be condemned, someone sees the opposite side of that coin. Nobody wins a debate; there are just opinions about what is right and what is wrong. Right and wrong. Black and white. Thou shalt not. We live in the realm of absolutes, often, when we talk about justice being served. There often isn't a lot of room for conversation and grace seems absent.

That's what makes this little story about the little man Zacchaeus so compelling, not only in our hearing but most especially when it made the rounds in the community before the writer

of Luke's gospel included it in his version of the Jesus story. The first Century Jewish community would have heard this story as a direct commentary on slavish adherence to the law. Zacchaeus is a tax collector. You'll remember from last week how they ripped off their Jewish friends, for Rome, all the time. More than that, Zacchaeus is the chief tax collector, enjoying top spot in what seems like a giant pyramid scheme. Zacchaeus was rich, on the backs of his faith community. He was hated.

This morning, I'm not much interested in the detail Luke gives us about Zacchaeus' height or the fact that he climbs a tree in order to get a glimpse of Jesus through the crowd that is following him to Jericho, on his last stop before the events of Palm Sunday. I will say, it's not particularly good form for a man of Zacchaeus' political power to be climbing trees in broad daylight. But for the purposes of good story telling, I think Luke gets Zacchaeus up a tree for Jesus to notice the silly behavior.

And in the version that Kelly shared with us this morning from Eugene Patterson's *The Message*, we heard: "When Jesus got to the tree, he looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, hurry down. Today is my day to be a guest in your home." We don't know how Jesus knew his name; Zacchaeus has no name tag. From the story, there is no indication that these two have ever met each other. It's likely that this is an instance where the writer of Luke picks up a story from within the faith community, hearing it second or third hand and doesn't get too bogged down in the details. We simply know that Jesus looks at the guy, names him, and says to him, I'm coming to your house today.

Grace incarnate, the one who loves unconditionally, this Jesus of Nazareth who claimed his own humanity, at his baptism in the Jordan river, just like all the rest of the brood of vipers, has likely taken a look at the Jewish guy in the tree, wondered about the obvious dis-connect with the rest of the community and thinks to himself: "what's this guy's story? What's he doing up a tree? I think I'll invite myself over to his house for supper."

Of course the crowd is miffed. Of course they're going to see injustice. This is a simple case of breaking Jewish law and custom. Zacchaeus is ritually unclean. He's a thief and a coward; sinful, lawless in every way...and Jesus has the audacity to invite himself to Zacchaeus' house - not any one of their homes...the guy who's up the tree. What the.... "What business does (Jesus) have getting cozy with this crook?"

The next point I want to make requires us to think about recent biblical scholarship; I need to get a little technical. For centuries the Christian church has studied this story believing that Zacchaeus experienced a conversion in the moment he scrambled out of the tree. Grace was coming to his house and here was his opportunity to commit to his own repentance. It's a classic orthodox Christian understanding; grace comes after someone seeks forgiveness, when someone repents, not before. Most translations of the original Greek suggest that Zacchaeus makes a promise in response to Jesus invitation. For example, *The New Revised*

Standard Version reads “Zacchaeus says: 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.” Jesus responds by saying, “today salvation has come to this house.” See, no grace without repentance. This is orthodox Christian theology.

But contemporary biblical scholarship is re-evaluating this little sentence. Scholars are beginning to agree that the original Greek did NOT put the verbs of giving to the poor and paying back, in the near future. Rather, Luke is telling us in the original Greek that Zacchaeus is doing these things already. These verbs, these actions are in the present tense. Scholars are beginning to agree that Eugene Patterson’s translation in the message is likely more accurate. In response to the community grumbling over the promise Jesus makes to have dinner at his house, Paterson’s writes: “Zacchaeus just stood there, a little stunned. He stammered apologetically, “Master, I give away half my income to the poor – and if I’m caught cheating, I pay four times the damages.” And according to this version, Jesus says, hey, it’s grace day, salvation day here. Zacchaeus is already a man of Abraham, a man in a restored relationship with God.

Friends let’s not lose this. Except for the fact that Jesus comes to dinner at his house, nothing changes for Zacchaeus. He’s still a hated tax collector, even though he’s doing it more honestly. He’s still a puppet of Rome. He’s still rich because of the work he does. And still, grace comes to his house. Grace comes not by anything we do in seeking forgiveness – Zacchaeus was already living into an honest expression of tax collecting – grace just is, grace just comes, grace never stops. Jesus came to show us how this is true; how the lost are restored.

As we got into our conversation at Waves on Sunday and as each of us gets into our own notions about right and wrong in matters of justice, I wonder if the story of Zacchaeus isn’t reminding us that grace – present, infinitely consistent, never ending – is already the state we inherit. It’s already the place from which we, as followers of this Jesus, are called to operate. When we remember the times in our lives when we have experienced this omnipresent grace, this overwhelming sense of forgiveness, in spite of what we thought of ourselves, we recognize that the grace of God is only known in the world by how we give witness to it in our relationships with one another.

What am I saying? This is a question of attachment and a question of living in the present moment. When we think of Ivan Henry wrongly incarcerated for 27 years...we can imagine how we could build up a black and white case of a travesty of justice, getting angrier by the second. Even though anyone in his “right mind” would do the exact opposite, I believe Henry’s attitude is pointing to the way of the gospel. This unconditional grace, this unconditional forgiveness that will never be withdrawn asserting, that was then, this is now.

We can't take back the time. We can't fix what went wrong. We can only ask "what is my relationship to this moment." You've heard me say that before.

This isn't a question of justice. This is a question of health. What do I want my relationship to this moment to be? It's mine for the making.

That's what it is to live in this moment. Jesus said it. Today is salvation day...this is how it works. And friends, in my mind this is the only thing Christians bring to the community, to the commons, to the collective human experience. When justice seems to fail, when black and white thinking no longer addresses the most complex issues, when the seemingly inhumane things people do to each other stretches the world's capacity for compassion, this gift of grace – this call to stand with every person in whatever circumstance – is the hardest commitment we can make to the world. But it's the only thing we have to offer. Our own experience of grace, of feeling the hand of salvation, of Jesus looking at us and saying, "I'm coming to your house today" gives us the courage to be, and to offer this very same gift to the world. Amen.