

Shortly after I was ordained, nearly 10 years ago, I was out getting groceries. The cashier was a young woman who was very friendly and really engaged with all the people who were coming into her check-out lane. So as she was ringing up my groceries, we started having what I thought was a really nice conversation. We talked about how our days were going and what plans we had for the weekend. She shared about how she would be graduating from college in just a few weeks and shared that she was excited to start her career in social work. And then she asked me what I did for a living, which is where things got weird.

Now, you have to understand that I'm not ashamed of being a pastor at all; but I also know from experience that it tends to make things awkward. Either people respond by wanting to tell you their whole life story (which I love, but maybe we should just enjoy the rest of the flight instead), or they get really turned away by it and completely shut down. So, having said that, I told the cashier that I worked for a non-profit. But it turns out, that only drew her interest even more and she wanted to know what kind of non-profit it was. Well, eventually I had to just say it, that I am a Lutheran pastor and the non-profit I serve is a church. Let me tell you, the conversation ended right then and there because upon hearing this, she quickly finished scanning the rest of my groceries and said flatly, "Your total is \$167." And that was the end of it.

Now, I don't hold anything against this young woman. I don't know what her experience has been like with pastors or the church. I can guess a little bit, but I certainly don't fault her for responding in the way that she did. I mean, in all honesty, I'm not sure I like meeting pastors all the time either. Because here's the thing: people are complicated. Human beings are complex. And a negative interaction with someone like a pastor can greatly shape how we feel with the next interaction. The truth is that as much as we want to be able to sort ourselves (and other) into binary categories of good and bad, righteous or sinful, faithful or not, that's not a realistic picture of who we are.

Take Zacchaeus for instance. On its face, this seems like a simple, familiar story that many of us have heard many times over. And as soon as we started reading the Gospel text this morning, I could see a lot of you are restlessly moving about in your seats, just itching to sing the song, so let's do this real quick... [Slide 1]. Okay, so Zacchaeus was a short tax collector who was once a "bad guy" but upon meeting Jesus, he commits himself to living a more honest life. Simple, right? Well, not so fast. In reality, this story isn't as straight-forward as it may seem. It's more complicated than that.

You see, there are a few things that aren't entirely clear in the Greek and that makes translation of this passage a bit of a challenge. For example, it's unclear who the short one is in the text. Is Zacchaeus short? Or is the reason Zacchaeus can't see because the crowd has swarmed around Jesus, who himself is the short in stature one? The text really could be read either way. But perhaps more significantly is that where our translation says that Zacchaeus "will give away half his possessions and will give back 4 times as much to those he defrauded", the text in Greek speaks of this as a present action. Which means that a more literal reading would suggest that Zacchaeus isn't pledging himself to change, but is defending himself by stating that he already has the custom of giving away half his possessions and giving back 4 times what was defrauded.

And the thing is, there's no consensus on this. It's complicated and messy. Is Zacchaeus a man who commits himself to a new way of living having met Jesus? Or is he a rare, upright tax collector who is generous beyond comprehension? And I'm sorry if that muddies the waters a bit on Zacchaeus, but at the same time, I'm not sorry either. Rather than trying to figure out which binary category to put him in, I think we would do well to simply say, "Yes." Zacchaeus is a man who has been changed on account of meeting Jesus. And yes, he is a man who leans into extreme generosity. He's all these things and more because we are, too. That's who we are as human beings. Complex. Complicated. Muddled. Messy.

And that's what I love about All Saints'. You see, for us in our Lutheran tradition, a saint isn't someone who lives an exemplary life, free from criticism or blame. A saint isn't someone who is holier than thou. The saints aren't the best among us, which we can only hope to be. The saints are people. Real people. And that means complicated, messy people. Because ultimately, what makes someone a saint is less about the righteousness of our lives, and more about the transformational grace of God which encompasses every part of our lives.