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During the past four weeks of Lent we've watched parables of Jesus come alive before our very eyes, from the Good Samaritan to a fig tree to a woman searching for a lost coin to a rich man longing for a sip of water. This morning another story comes to life, and although not a parable that Jesus told, it's an encounter Jesus brought to life through a scorned tax collector who many of us sang about in our childhood. The song about Zacchaeus flows easily from our tongues:

Zacchaeus was a wee little man,
a wee little man was he.
He climbed up in a sycamore tree,
for the Lord he wanted to see.

In the song, Jesus tells Zacchaeus to come down, then repeats the main point of the encounter, "for I'm coming to your house today."

It's a catchy song, one that children can readily identify with since they also are often too short to see what's going on. The deeper message of the story, however, we often miss—the amazing transformation of what happened when Jesus encountered the despised tax collector. The crowds grumbled that Jesus was willing to hang out with a

tax collector, for these money takers were known to collect more than required and keep the excess for themselves. And so the crowd grumbled disapprovingly. Have you ever done that? Grumbled under your breathe about someone? Maybe even about a person who wandered into our church: someone who doesn't look like us, act like us, or believe the same things?

Before Jesus even arrived at the house, the story tells us that Zacchaeus stopped and promised, "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 then proclaimed, "Today salvation has come to this house." It might be tempting to think that salvation occurred because of what Zacchaeus did, that he earned his way into Jesus' favor because of his actions. Sometimes we think we can gain our entrance into heaven based on what we do, as was the case with

a woman who came to the gates of heaven and was greeted by St. Peter. Peter asks her if she could give a brief history of her life with an

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emphasis on the good deeds she has done in order to gain entrance into heaven.

“You will need 1,000 points to be admitted,” Peter tells the woman.

“This will be a cinch,” the woman thinks to herself, “I’ve been involved in church from the days of my youth.” Then she begins to list her activities for Peter. She was an officer in her youth group, served in every possible position she could as a youngster. Was on the church board and every committee the church had to offer. Her list was extensive.

“Very impressive,” Peter says while smiling at the woman. An angel standing with them also smiled and nodded while tallying the points and then whispered in Peter’s ear. Peter tells the woman, “This is quite striking; we seldom see people of your very good works. You will be pleased to know that you have 327 points! Is there anything else you can think of?”

She begins to name every single act of kindness she could think of as the angel made notes on an angelic clipboard.

Peter looks at the clipboard and says, “This is quite exceptional! You now have a total of 402 points. Can you think of anything else?”

The distressed woman strives to recall good deeds, like the time she helped someone cross the street. She finally arrives at a grand total of 431 points and cries out, “There’s no hope for me! What more could I have done? O Lord, all I can do is beg for your mercy!”

“THAT,” exclaims Peter, “is a thousand points! Welcome!”¹

God’s grace comes from nothing that we do, but is a gift given in spite of our shortcomings. In the story of Zacchaeus, Jesus told him that salvation had come to his house because “you too are a son of Abraham.” Zacchaeus was already part of God’s family but may not have recognized it. By returning what he had unfairly overcharged them as a tax collector, Zacchaeus suddenly recognized himself and others as members of the same family: God’s family, a place where everyone is treated with kindness and justice.

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Notice carefully how the encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus ended, how Jesus highlighted his point: “The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.” Zacchaeus was always a part of God’s family, but he had lost his way. He had placed more value on cheating others out of their hard earned money in order to line his own pockets with luxury. He had forgotten what it meant to be part of God’s family, a place where even he was welcomed, a place where those who are lost can find their way home again.

In a sense, that’s what we mean every time we gather at the Table on Sunday. We celebrate that we are part of God’s family, a place where everyone is welcome around the table, which is something we affirmed the past five weeks during Soup & Study as we discussed our Disciples identity statement: “We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one body of Christ we welcome all to the Lord’s Table as God has welcomed us.”

This past Thursday we discussed what it meant for us to have an open Table. One person said, “The

Table is an invitation for others to join us.” Another commented, “The Table is a verb, it gets me ready for the week.” Our Table is portable, suggested someone, for we take it with us after we leave worship. Our Table is a place of reconciliation, suggested another, where we can gather with our hurts and disappointments, knowing that we are forgiven and made whole once again. And finally, our Table is long—a place where everyone can find a place to sit.

I think that’s why Jesus went to Zacchaeus’ house, to remind him while gathered at his table that he was part of God’s family. In response, he motivated Zacchaeus to change his life. Wouldn’t it be interesting to hear how someone was affected by this change in Zacchaeus’ life? Just imagine what he might tell us.

I’m not like the other speakers you’ve heard the past four weeks, for I’m not here to tell you about another one of Jesus’ parables. And yet, it’s almost like a parable, for I couldn’t believe what I saw happen—it was almost as though Jesus was acting out a living parable right before my eyes, for when he went to the home of...wait. I’m getting ahead of my story. Let me tell you from the beginning what happened.

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I lived in Jericho, a town located on a flat plain surrounded by mountains. We had lots of palm trees and plenty of streams watering our area, but due to the surrounding mountains, the road to our town was filled with robbers who could hide in the mountains. Jesus used the road leading to our town as the location of his parable about the Good Samaritan, the hero who helped the wounded man robbed on his way to our town.

When I heard that Jesus was actually coming to my town, I had to see this guy. I had heard so much about him, but since so many others had as well, a large crowd had gathered to see him. I could not get to the front of the crowd, but I noticed a guy up in a tree trying to see Jesus. What a clever way to get a view—I wish I had thought of that!

When Jesus approached the tree, he stopped underneath it and spoke to the man in the tree. He said, “Zacchaeus, come down, for I would like to eat with you in your home.”

That name sounded familiar, but I couldn’t remember who he was—but then suddenly I heard people murmuring in the crowd about him. “He’s a tax collector,” they complained. “Why would Jesus want to eat with him!?”

I would have made a much better dinner companion. I should have climbed that tree! Those of us watching this scene could not imagine why Jesus would eat with such a person, for he was known to collect more money than required, then pocketing the rest for himself. He

was no better than the thief in Jesus’ parable about the Good Samaritan—taking what did not belong to him!

I went home feeling sorry for myself, but then several days later Zacchaeus knocked on my door. “Oh great,” I said. “Now what tax are you collecting?”

“None,” he replied. “I am returning the money I took from you, along with four times the amount.”

“Why?” I asked with a confused look on my face.

“When Jesus came to my home to eat a meal with me, he changed my life. I realize what wrongs I have done, and I am repaying four times the amount I wrongly took. I hope you will forgive me for what I have done.”

I was speechless. He gave me a bag of money and left, and I stood there with my mouth open, unable to speak. This man Zacchaeus was a living parable—a life turned around by his encounter with Jesus. I had hoped my life could be changed in such a dramatic way, and I hope yours can be as well. (Extinguish candle)

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In our remaining weeks of Lent, may you welcome everyone to this place, trusting that you are part of God’s family, and celebrating that there is plenty of room at God’s Table.

¹ Adapted from *Homiletics*, October 2007, p. 65.