

## Love Saves

*Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "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." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." **Luke 19:1-10***

The story of Zacchaeus would have been our "regular Gospel" this coming Sunday. Since we will be hearing other Scripture at our Celebration of New Ministry I offer this reflection on this wonderful Gospel!

Zacchaeus' story teaches us that LOVE changes us. Love opens us up. Love calls us to rise when we fall and love sits with us and holds us when we just can't take IT anymore---whatever "IT" is. Love saves us. I'll say it again---love saves us. Love is the very essence of our lives in Christ.

In a world that very often sends us more messages about our inability to measure up, Jesus stands before us to remind us that we are loved and blessed by God. No matter who we are or where we have lost ourselves, God stands ready to call us back into fullness of life.

In the story of Zacchaeus we celebrate and bear witness the saving grace of God's love and the power of that love to change us. Today we see our salvation. In this story we see the intersection of what it looks like when perfect love meets a life that has been corrupted by--- who knows what. We don't know why Zacchaeus became a tax collector—the chief tax collector no less.

How and when does someone make the decision to become an outcast to the people and society in which they live? Many people of course never have a choice. They are born into poverty or they are not the "right" color or gender, or nationality or sexual orientation, or the right religion--the list goes on and on. And just like that, through events most often outside of their control—they find themselves on the outside looking in.

But it looks like Zacchaeus made a choice. And his choice insures that he would be known as a traitor to his people and reviled by most everyone. Was it pure and simple greed? Maybe.

Was it a hard luck life that made him feel this was his only choice? Perhaps.

The point is of course we just don't know. But if we can wipe the Sunday school images out of our mind of a wee little man up a tree, what we see in Zacchaeus' story is a powerful and poignant portrait of what it looks like to be saved by love.

Frederick Buechner, in his book "Wishful Thinking, A Seeker's ABC" says this about salvation—it is a substantial quote, but captures beautifully the truer meaning.

*"Salvation: it is an experience first and a doctrine second. It's doing the work you're best at doing and like doing best, hearing great music, having great fun, seeing something very beautiful, or weeping at somebody else's tragedy—all of these are related to the experience of salvation because in all of them two things happen: (1) you lose yourself, and (2) you find that you are more fully yourself than usual.*

*A closer analogy is the experience of love. When you love somebody, it is no longer yourself who is the center of your own universe. It is the one you love who is. You forget yourself, you deny yourself. You give of yourself, so that by all the rules of arithmetic and logic there should be less of yourself than there was to start with. Only by a curious paradox there is more. You feel that at last you really are yourself.*

*The experience of salvation involves the same paradox. Jesus put it like this: "He who loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matt. 10:39). You give up your old self-seeking self for somebody you love and thereby save yourself at last. You must die with Christ so that you can rise with him, Paul says. It is what Baptism is all about.*

*Loving God is not about tit for tat---I will love God and God will save me--- To love God is to be saved. To love anybody is a significant step along the way.*

*Loving and Living for God is not about getting into heaven, because whichever side of the grave you happen to be talking about—to love and live for God IS Heaven! Salvation is a gift, not an achievement. You can make*

*yourself moral. You can make yourself religious. But you can't make yourself love.*

*"We love," John says, "because God first loves us" (1 John 4:19).*

*Who knows how the awareness of God's love first hits people. We all have our own tales to tell, including those who wouldn't believe in God if you paid them. Some moment happens in your life that you say Yes to right up to the roots of your hair, which makes it worth being born just to have it happen. Laughing with somebody till the tears run down your cheeks. Waking up to the first snow. Being held close by someone you love.*

*Whether you thank God for that moment or thank your lucky stars, moments like these are the ones that are trying to open up your whole life. If you turn your back on such a moment and hurry along to Business as Usual, it may lose you the ball game. If you throw your arms around such a moment and bless it, it may save your soul.*

*And then Buechner poses this question: How about the person you know who as far as you can possibly tell has never had or embraced such a moment---the soreheads and the slobbs of the world, the ones that the world has hopelessly crippled? Maybe for that person the moment that has to happen is you."*

*Whatever pain or hardness of heart that had shaped Zacchaeus into a man who would choose a life of greed, isolation and ostracism is forgotten when the perfect love of Jesus calls him down from a tree and says, Come and break bread with me."*

*There are a million and one ways that life invites us to fold in on ourselves and self-protect---a million and one ways we can decide to clench our fists and shake it the people and the world around us.*

*We do not need to be saved from a life of eternal damnation by God---there is no such thing. I will say it again, *there is no such thing*. But we desperately need to be saved from the million and one ways we lose ourselves to resentments, old wounds, and bad choices.*

*The love of Christ invites us to let all of that go. We are invited to risk joy, believe in the power of forgiveness, and call everyone we can into this same crazy, vulnerable making place! We are invited to believe that the love of Christ absorbs our pain, absorbs our isolation, and that this loves saves us.*

Grace and Peace, Stephanie+