

Unraveled: Seeking God When Our Plans Fall Apartⁱ
 3rd of 5: *Jesus Flips the Script: Unraveling Expectations*
 Luke 18:9-14 ~ Luke 19:1-10
 13th Sunday after Pentecost ~ August 22, 2021
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Introduction to Scripture

What do we already know about Zacchaeus? He was short. And nobody liked him because he was a greedy tax collector. And not just any old tax collector, but a chief tax collector, and so even more deeply complicit in the system that extorted money unjustly from people of limited means. We also know he climbed a tree to see Jesus. Did you ever wonder *why* Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus, enough to climb a tree as a grown up? Perhaps he had heard Jesus' parable about the pharisee and the tax collector. Maybe he figured, "Hey--If Jesus is making up stories where the tax collector seems to be the hero... I've got to check this guy out."

What do we already know about God from our first two sermons in this Unraveled series? Here are the emerging threads that we are seeing as signature moves of God. By the Oaks of Mamre, with Abraham & Sarah; and in Jeremiah's letter to the exiles in Babylon, we saw God move through: surprise, impossibility and self-emptying that leads to shalom. Not just for one person, but for the whole community. These are the threads through which God has moved broken people moved forward into God's dream of shalom.

Today, it's not an oak tree, but a sycamore tree; and it's not Babylon, but Jericho, and it's not Jeremiah but Jesus "passing through." Perhaps even Jesus was surprised by the turn of events as he walked through the crowd on the streets of Jericho. You will hear him change his plans from "passing through" to staying awhile. Because a short man climbed a tall tree. And Jesus saw him. What more can Jesus teach us, today? Let's climb a tree and see what happens. Maybe Jesus is getting ready to flip a script or two.

Sermon

Switching gears. Easier said than done, when it comes to the way we do things. The way we see things. The way we see ourselves. And the way we see others. When it comes to driving a car or truck or tractor, we know we have to depress the clutch to put the engine in neutral, before we can shift from one gear to another. If you fail to put the engine in neutral, what happens? Yes: you grind the gears.

My dad was the one who taught me how to drive our standard transmission red, stick shift VW bug. He was patient and brave to take on this task with 16-year-old, slightly terrified me. And I did learn a skill that has come in very handy over the years. But I'm not sure I learned the best driving habits from him. For instance, he told me if I went fast enough around a corner while driving through our town of Wichita, Kansas, I wouldn't *really* have to downshift from 3rd to 2nd gear to make the turn... Well, as you well know: that can make for some dangerously quick turns, nor is it the best thing for the car's engine. But, hey--why shift gears when you don't have to?

More challenging than depressing the clutch pedal and moving the gear shift, is the ability to shift one's perspective: the way we see another person, or group of people. And perhaps even more difficult, the way we see ourselves. Whatever gear we are in, we are more likely to just go faster around the corners than to shift our perspective. Or maybe we don't even know how to access our spiritual clutch pedal. Thanks to Jesus, and our two scriptures lessons from the Gospel of Luke, hopefully we will leave this service with a practical driving lesson to engage our ability to shift spiritual gears. Like he did with Zacchaeus that day, Jesus wants to stay with us and help us turn the corner on the brokenness in our lives.

Let's dig in. Did you notice how Jesus seems to surprise just about everyone he encounters: his disciples, religious leaders like the Pharisees, and tax collectors? In our first lesson, where Jesus made up a story, a parable, about the pharisee and the tax Collector, the surprise, would have been shocking to all who heard it: the Pharisee, or let's just say, the Pastor person in the parable, does *not* shine as the model pray-er, nor the model person, but *instead*, flip the script: it's the scum bag tax collector, who gets it right.

Thanks to the work of Jewish New Testament scholar, Amy-Jill Levine, open up an alternative perspective on this parable. I believe she mixes it up in a way that seems much closer to the spirit of Jesus' teachings. And helps us to see a golden thread running through both this parable and the Zacchaeus story. She suggests that Jesus' parable about the pharisee and the tax collector is not simply a reversal, a switch from who is the good guy and who is the bad guy. If that were the case, we walk away from this scene thinking, "Thank God I am not like that Pharisee." We would walk away still being judgmental, dualistic, and dismissive. That doesn't sound like Jesus, does it? You want to see Jesus? Get ready to have *this* interpretation flipped!

First, it is important to note that the parable really ends in the middle of verse 14, with Jesus saying, "I tell you, this man went down to his home justified *rather than* the other." That was really where Jesus ended it, according to our best scholarship. Let's drop the clutch and stay in neutral for a moment. The words translated as "rather than" the other, in the Greek are *para ekeinon*.

Stay with me here--You know that prefix "para" from words like "parallel, paradox, parable." We use the word "Para" as a title for teacher assistants assigned to particular students, to work alongside the teacher in classrooms. The most familiar use of this prefix in English is "to set side by side." It's more often about juxtaposition, such as "next to." So perhaps, what Jesus' parable was seeking to teach us, was something even more shocking, than role reversal. Something far more communitarian-minded and non-dual. Try this translation on for size, "I tell you, this man went down to his home justified *alongside of* the other. Or even more provocative, "*because of* the other." ⁱⁱ

Doesn't that sound more like Jesus? Mixing it up, leaving us kind of scratching our heads? Springing everyone loose from their assigned position and status? You can see why Luke wanted to tie up the loose ends and nail it down with his added tag line, "for all who exalt

themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves, will be exalted." We are not so sure that Jesus would have. Again and again, we see this golden thread emerging: the salvation and healing of each of us, is interdependent on the welfare, the shalom of all of us. Salvation for one moves us in the direction of salvation and greater welfare of all. That's what happens when we let Jesus come into our house and stay.

When Zacchaeus is saved in this story: we are told that salvation or healing, comes to his whole house AND to all he has formerly wronged. He will generously repay them, and their economic wellbeing is restored. When Jesus flipped Zacchaeus' script: untold numbers were also healed and restored. Who knows, maybe his conversion influenced other tax collectors to do the same.

What needs flipping around here? Within each of us and our community and world? In their article titled, "This is the World Being Left to Us by Adults," by four youth climate activists, Greta Thunberg(Sweden) Adriana Calderón(Mexico), Farzana Faruk Jhumu(Bangladesh) and Eric Njuguna (Kenya), they sound the alarm as only young people can do, in response to the state of our global climate that the United Nations Secretary General just characterized as the "Code Red for Humanity." They wrote: "For children and young people, climate change is the single greatest threat to our futures. We are the ones who will have to clean up the mess you adults have made, and we are the ones who are more likely to suffer now. Children and more vulnerable than adults to the dangerous weather events, diseases and other harms caused by climate change."

It finds that virtually every child on the planet is exposed to at least one climate or environmental hazard right now. "A staggering 850 million, about a third of all the world's children, are exposed to four or more climate or environmental hazards, including heat waves, cyclones, air pollution, flooding or water scarcity... This is the world being left to us. But there is still time to change our climate future. We are in a crisis of crises. A pollution crisis. A climate crisis. A children's rights crisis. We will not allow the world to look away."ⁱⁱⁱ

I am sure Jesus is not looking away. And neither can we. How do we disengage politics from public health? Or from access to housing? Or from the fundamental right to vote? When Jesus comes to stay, I believe even these scripts can be flipped and shalom can happen. We need to remember to climb just one tree at a time. Are you tired of grinding your gears? Lugging your engine? Or of trying to go fast enough so you don't have to shift at all?

Here's the practical spiritual driving lesson I will close us with. It comes from 29 years of pastoral experience in pre-surgical hospital bays, birthing beds, and hospice death beds. Start with gratitude. When you feel scared or sad or stuck: take a breath and consider what you are truly thankful for. Gratitude opens the gears and quietly invites God's shalom. It can bring you into the neutral space where you can allow Jesus to stay and flip your script, shift your perspective. Not right away, or all at once. But I have seen the turn happen again and again. No matter the age of the person or the intensity of the situation.

I want to share with you a big gratitude I have this morning. It is for something beautiful that happened here yesterday morning in the Parlor. Carmen Lawler, our Christian Educator, led a Sunday School Teacher Orientation where we had eleven people (in person and on screen), three of whom were teenagers attending. All of them ready and eager to share their faith and their lives with the children of our church. To be able to have in person Sunday School again, and to have seasoned, highly skilled teachers returning as well as brand new ones ready to begin: that was a beautiful sight to see and experience.

What is yours? What gratitude comes into your heart? You will get to write it down on the ribbon in your bulletin in a moment. For now, I will end with this: Gentlepersons, start your engines!

ⁱ This sermon theme series, "Unraveled: Seeking God When Our Plans Fall Apart," was created by Lisle Gwynn Garrity, Sanctifiedart.org.

ⁱⁱ Amy-Jill Levine, *Short stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, (Harper Collins: New York, NY, 2014), pp. 207-210.

ⁱⁱⁱ [<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/19/opinion/climate-un-report-greta-thunberg.html>]