

Tree and Social Climbers

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, November 10, 2019, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Luke 19:1-10](#) and [Luke 14:12-14](#)

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When I hear the story of Zacchaeus, I end up thinking about President Gerald Ford. I was almost 14 when he came to visit Lexington, Massachusetts, where I grew up. He was kicking off the nation's bicentennial celebrations by visiting the location of the first battle (a skirmish, really) of the American Revolution.

It was during our Monday Morning Bible Study that I realized why this particular memory comes to mind in relationship to this particular scripture reading. The crowds were huge. There was a lot of time spent waiting around. And Secret Service agents kept testing the sound system by telling people who had climbed into trees so they could see, to come down out of the trees.

I don't remember much about President Ford's visit itself – other than him being late and, for all the buildup, I was underwhelmed. It was in no sense a life-changing event for me. That is in sharp contrast to Zacchaeus' experience on the day he climbed a tree to see Jesus.

This is one of those scripture stories we like to share with kids. They know what it's like to be excited. And they know what it's like to be short. And they know who affirming it is to be called by name, to be known and seen. And all of these things are elements of the story.

The problem is, if we see this as a scripture for children, we too easily forget that it is a scripture for adults, too. There is much more going on here than a short guy being called by name by a celebrity and responding with a gratitude so deep it turns his life around. But to understand all that's going on here, we need to start by understanding the role of gratitude in Roman imperial culture.

The Roman imperial view of gratitude was not that it was simply a nice thing to feel or a polite thing to do.¹ Gratitude was a political, economic, and social practice. It was integral to the Roman social structure. The Roman social structure was a sort of pyramid. It was more complicated than this, but essentially, Caesar was at the top along with the ultra-elites; there was a middle (much smaller than this triangle suggests) that included the bureaucrats who made the system run; and the masses at the bottom who were poor.

The wealth, however, was not a pyramid with a large base. The wealth distribution was a pyramid standing on its point. All the money was concentrated at the top and the masses at the bottom had little. A system that has to balance on the point is precarious and needs props to hold it up. For Rome those props were a big army (with lots of violence) and a patronage system.

¹ This explanation of imperial gratitude and the story of Zacchaeus is based on an TheoEd talk given by Diana Butler Bass, <https://vimeo.com/318281851>, posted maybe sometime in March 2019.

The patronage system was based on *gratus*. The people at the top, the people with all the wealth, were responsible for bestowing blessings on those below. These blessings typically took the form of protection and provision. The people at the bottom were responsible to pass up appreciation. This appreciation typically took the form of taxes, tribute, worship, utter loyalty, and rendering unto Caesar one's life.

The blessings that (supposedly) came down from above were *gratus*, traditionally translated "grace" or "favor." The appreciation returned from below was *gratus*, traditionally translated "gratitude." I imagine that the very act of owing, of legally owing (for this system was enforced by law) gratitude would have had psychological impact of reinforcing powerlessness.

This was a system of obligatory gratitude that put people in debt and left them there. Always. If someone gave you something, you *had* to discharge that debt.

Enter Jesus – who rejects this imperial approach to gratitude. And we see this in the story of Zacchaeus

Like Jesus, Zacchaeus is a Jew. He's a Jew who became a tax collector. Jews could become tax collectors for the Roman empire. This didn't happen by earning an MBA from Caesar Augustus University. One became a tax collector by bidding on the position. Now and again, the Romans would open some positions in that bureaucratic class and people in the occupied countries could *buy* their way in.

The bureaucrats made sure the Roman imperial patronage system worked. They made sure benefits flowed down to the poor people (skimming something along the way) and that gratitude got back up to Caesar (skimming something along the way). We can assume that Zacchaeus bought his way into this position and that he took full advantage of the money it provided.

The story says that Zacchaeus heard that Jesus was coming to town. That would make no difference to Zacchaeus if Zacchaeus didn't know something about Jesus. It would have made no difference unless Zacchaeus had heard what Jesus had been talking about and doing. Maybe Zacchaeus heard some version of today's second lesson.

Jesus said that if you're going to hold a dinner, don't invite the people who will pay you back.² Invite people who *can't* pay you back. Don't participate in the imperial system of *quid pro quo*. Don't invest in the patronage system. Feed people who are hungry. Put love into action. That must have been a threatening thing for someone who had literally bought into the imperial system so deeply. Jesus had been talking about all kinds of things, maybe even about paying taxes (something he talks about in the next chapter of Luke's gospel).

I can hear Zacchaeus wondering, "What's he gonna say here in Jericho? I've got to hear this for myself. I've got to hear it before anyone else does because it could really screw up my livelihood.

² See, for instance, Diana Butler Bass on Luke 14:12-14, <https://mobile.twitter.com/dianabutlerbass/status/1192248636341551104> (posted and accessed 6 November 2019).

So, Zacchaeus runs to the edge of town and he climbs a tree – which shouldn't surprise any of us because that's what Zacchaeus does. He's a climber. He climbed his way into his position in the town – chief tax collector. He climbs his way up above and in front of everyone else so he can be above them all and get a better view.

And Jesus comes along and sees Zacchaeus up in the tree. “Hey, Zacchaeus, get out of that tree.” Come down, Zacchaeus. Come down out of your position above the people. Come down out of your complicity with the imperial system and government. Get out of those branches. Disentangle yourself. Come down. Be on the ground with me and with them.

The amazing this to me is that Zacchaeus does it.

Then Jesus says, “By the way, I'm coming to your house for dinner tonight.” In other words, Jesus calls him to the table. And it is at the table that we enter God's system of gratitude. Jesus calls Zacchaeus out of the imperial system of gratitude and into God's community. A table, not a pyramid. A place where gifts are abundant, not scarce. A place where we're all receivers and all givers, not a place where only a few give and the rest of us are forever in debt to those small few.

Zacchaeus hears this invitation and he says, “Yes.” And we know that Zacchaeus' ‘yes’ is political because of what he does next. “I'm going to return whatever I've stolen and I'm going to make right all the fraud I've committed.” I'm going to undo the bad I've done by being part of the imperial patronage system. He quits his job as a tax collector and he enters the kin-dom of God, for salvation has come to this house.

From a Roman point of view, Jesus is an ingrate. Jesus is an ingrate because he refused to participate in the system that traps us in debt and that enslaves us to oppression. Instead, Jesus resets the ancient story of the Hebrew people. It's the story of the Exodus, when what may be the best question ever asked of God is asked: Can you set a table in the wilderness? The answer, as we know, again and again, is, “Yes.”

Jesus invites those around him, again and again, to a life of gratitude that is free from any obligation. He invites them, he invites us into lives that are blessed with jubilee, with sabbath, and with true, deep gratitude. Please, come down out of the tree and sit around the table of blessing and abundance. And when you've experienced a place at the table, I think you'll offer that ancient prayer that comes from a place deep within the heart: “Wow! Thanks!”

Amen.

Questions for reflection:

When have you experienced gratitude as something you owed, as an obligation, as a quid pro quo?

When has gratitude been a spontaneous act of joy and love?

What can you do to let go of imperial gratitude and embrace the gratitude of the table?