

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

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October 30, 2016
Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4
Luke 19:1-10

UNCONDITIONAL

The car plunged through the barrier and over the cliff. Nadine prayed the airbag would save her, her generous mouth opened in a scream, her periwinkle blue eyes fixed in horror on the ocean below, her auburn hair, thick and luxuriant, streaming behind her, her elegant, long legs braced for the crash. Nadine had always been strikingly beautiful, even as a child. Her hair, less golden then, was always held back by a blue ribbon. In summer a few delicious freckles dusted her nose. Her hands were elegant and beauticians often commented on her healthy nails, nails that were now digging into the car's upholstery....¹ That might be a case of a writer putting in a bit too much detail, don't you think?

And yet, there are some stories where I wish I had more details. Couldn't Luke have given us a little more to fill out the story? Zacchaeus wanted to see who Jesus was as he passed through the town of Jericho on his way to Jerusalem. I wish I knew more about what Zacchaeus knew of Jesus that had stoked his curiosity that day, motivating him to see who Jesus was. There must have been some buzz about town as the one-of-a-kind rabbi was passing through since there was quite a crowd following along after him. Perhaps word had gotten around that he had healed that blind beggar as he approached Jericho. Luke simply tells us that Zacchaeus wanted to see who Jesus was.

Another detail we don't know has to do with what Jesus knew of Zacchaeus ahead of time. But somehow, Jesus knows his name because he calls him by it when he approaches him. Here's what I would suggest might have happened. Jesus, is walking, surrounded by the crowd, but he sees a man up in the tree ahead of them. He addresses someone in the crowd: "Hey, friend, you've lived in Jericho for many years – do you know who that man up there in the tree might be?" "Yes, Jesus, that's Zacchaeus, and how do I put it politely? He is not only small in stature, he is small in heart as well. He is the chief tax collector for the region and you know how many people you have to cheat to reach that status with our Roman occupiers. There are many fine people clamoring for your attention. Just ignore that misnamed man." Zacchaeus, after all, means 'righteous one,' and if anyone failed to live up to his name, it was he.

I can imagine and fill in all kinds of details in the story. But Luke doesn't tell us what Zacchaeus knew about Jesus ahead of time that so interested him in seeing him that he climbed a tree in order to do so. Neither are we told what Jesus knew ahead of time about Zacchaeus. We fill in the details ourselves.

My family has been blessed to get to see a number of Broadway productions. When our son has been with us, after seeing where his seat is in the theater, he makes a plan for how he is going to get outside as quickly as possible after the curtain call. For after seeing something dramatic, he hopes to have a personal encounter, or at least get a selfie with the lead actors or actresses at the stage door as they leave the theater. But for Zacchaeus, the order was reversed. It was during and after a personal encounter, that the crowd got to see something dramatic take place.

The first dramatic event is that Jesus goes to him, calls him by name, and says he wants to stay at his house. Even though we aren't told how Jesus knows about Zacchaeus and his status as perhaps the town's most deplored citizen, it is clear that Jesus somehow knows about the man to whom he is speaking. The last person any respectable rabbi would approach is the first one to whom Jesus would go. We take note, however, that Jesus

doesn't begin by wagging his finger at the man and scolding him for ripping off his fellow citizens in order to live in wealth, as well as for also helping to fund the Roman soldiers who confiscated all kinds of freedom from the Jewish people day by day. Instead, he says he wants to stay at his house. It was the highest honor Jesus could have bestowed upon Zacchaeus. It was an expression of unconditional love. Zacchaeus did not have to change in order for Jesus to show him his love. Jesus definitely cared about the hurtful actions that helped the whole town know just what kind of man Zacchaeus was. And yet, although Luke doesn't mention it by name, Jesus' love, unconditional love, is clearly present in the scene.

And we see the power of that love dramatically displayed in a second event. Zacchaeus, who had spent his vocational life looking at his own people as objects to be abused so that he could build his wealth, suddenly was ready to live with compassion and a commitment to the restoration of justice. Going forward, a full half of all of his possessions he would give to the poor. In addition, to those whom he had defrauded, he would give them four times the amount of the taxing scheme he had used against them. He makes the commitment in public. It was the powerful love from Jesus that dramatically transformed the man, who on his own, had been such a distance from having been able to live up to his righteous name.

Today is Reformation Sunday, a time when we remember the beginnings of the Protestant church 499 years ago that would eventually be instrumental in shaping our identity as Presbyterians. A theme of our Reformed thinking is that God is the One who lovingly approaches us and in so doing, transforms us. The story of Zacchaeus is an apt one this day.

But as we ponder this story, we realize it was not just the unpatriotic tax man that Jesus loved unconditionally that day. At every occasion, Jesus showed that God's love went from A to Z without exclusion. Jesus was also loving the crowd that was following him. He loved them enough to show them a different way to live toward those from whom they were estranged. Unlike the case with Zacchaeus, their transformation doesn't happen immediately. We are told that these who were trying to follow in Jesus' way began grumbling that their leader showed such love to Zacchaeus, of all people. What happened after that? In fact, that is another little detail that Luke leaves out of the story.

We live in a world where much is unpredictable. In such a world, it is indeed good news that God's love for all people is vast and unconditional. But how those of us who try to follow in Jesus' way respond to that love, which is broader and deeper and more powerful than we respect is a detail to the ongoing story that we will have to fill in. How will that unconditional love toward us and others transform our behavior toward those whom we have excluded from the covenant community? Can we learn how to love unconditionally, like Jesus does? That's going to be an important detail for us to add to the story and unconditionally, that is a significant part of what we are called to do.

¹ A description about writers who include too much detail taken from <http://www.caroclarke.com/explaintoomuch.html>