

*Bailed Out in the Branches*  
Luke 19:1-10  
October 30, 2016  
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*He 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."*

One of the privileges I had in Seminary was visiting San Quentin State Prison. I'm not sure how many of you have been there, inside, but surely you've seen it from the outside. Those windows, stacked high, those are not offices. I was horrified when we first went into the prison and as far as my eye could see, there were cages the length of the long building, stacked 5 high. Two to a cell, about the size of a small bathroom. To be in San Quentin, it is likely the prisoner has committed murder, or something as extreme.

San Quentin is ironically considered the country club of prisons, because it offers over 75 rehabilitation opportunities a week. There are many professionals and volunteers who come each week to provide educational, spiritual, physical, artistic, and vocational enrichment services. Most other prisons in the state offer less than 10 programs a week. You can imagine the difference this makes in the life of a prisoner, to have access to these services.

I attended a Friday morning mediation group at San Quentin and I didn't think it possible that I could meditate with 60 prisoners – murderers or the like – for 30 minutes. Sitting in a circle between 2 prisoners with my eyes shut, at peace as the instructor led us on a guided meditation. But the peace was palpable. The spirituality in that room and among the people was real.

I also attended a Restorative Justice group on Thursday evenings, and I was humbled by the depth of wisdom, faith and peace these men conveyed. One told eloquently of meeting his victim face to face in the prison, and being able to apologize, ask for her forgiveness, and be forgiven. Another described his transformation through the Restorative Justice program, that he recognized the 14-year old kid in the getaway car is not who he is now as a 32 year old. He lives a life now thinking of others and the consequences of his actions, and he teaches this

through teen youth programs, sharing his experiences and helping others to avoid a life of criminality and gang-affiliation through community service.

It was evidence and testimony of how God's love and grace is available to everyone, just as our gospel passage today demonstrates this.

In the Luke passage, Zacchaeus is despised and outcast in his community for his profession. He is chief tax collector, working for the Romans, bidding on jobs and finding any means necessary to collect the tax owed to the Romans and then pilfer extra from his fellow Jewish community members for himself to pocket. Sleazy. He is described as a rich man, so he is clearly quite proficient at his occupation. In this way, he is in another type of prison, perhaps – living in a mansion but alone, no friends, no relationships except with his oppressors the Romans, and the tax collectors he oversees and likely also rips off.

We are told he is a short man. We can imagine as he joined the crowds to see Jesus pass through Jericho that he was at risk of being suffocated, with his short stature. It wasn't as if the crowds said, "Oh, please, go ahead," and let him make his way through to the front. He sees an opportunity – something he's good at – and he runs to a sycamore tree to climb up to see Jesus.

I'm guessing the sycamore, which is a densely leaved tree, was safe for Zacchaeus because he was well hidden. I imagine he lived in so much shame that he didn't really like being exposed or out in the open much.

But Jesus sees him. He spots him in the tree, and with divine pre-knowledge, he calls out his name, "Zacchaeus!" and tells him to come down from the tree, because Jesus himself will be coming to his house that very day. Jesus will be paying him a visit, and Zacchaeus will miss it if he stays up in that tree.

Zacchaeus is beside himself. He scurries down with the exuberance to welcome Jesus right back. How many of us would have thought of an excuse for why Jesus couldn't come over? "Oh, really, I'd love it but my house is a disaster!" or "Oh, that sounds great but I already have plans tonight!" or "Thank you, I have an important prayer meeting I must attend this evening." Politely decline. Too busy. "I have to work out!"

Zacchaeus, though, is ready for the transformation. He jumps down from his lofty hiding place and is immediately transformed. Meeting with Jesus is living water for the thirsty soul.

Like the prisoners who show they have changed their lives, despite their circumstances, Zacchaeus offers then and there to change his ways. He will give not the 10% prescribed as law, but 50% of his estate to the poor, and will pay back anyone he has cheated four times as much. And he is thrilled about this – overjoyed! Because he will have his life back. He will know freedom. The isolation he felt is

seriously reduced and will be all the more so when he shares what he has with others. When he can be of service, and make amends to those he has harmed.

Jesus is showing us in the passage and continues to show us today that no one is beyond the reaches of his view. No one is undeserving of God's grace.

The Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century began in part because the reformers saw that this concept of God's grace being available to everyone was not being practiced in the Church. What was being conveyed instead was that only "the righteous" are worthy of God's grace and anyone who could not meet that standard would be punished.

The Church had become an institution of human ideals, not Godly ideals. If only the righteous could be saved, what's the point of that? Jesus says he comes to seek and save the lost, those that have strayed. And we all do, so we all are fair game.

When I was in Prague a couple of weeks ago, I stayed near Old Town Square, which is a beautiful and enormous square surrounded by a clock tower and two magnificent churches dating back to the 1300s. In the center of the square is a gigantic monument honoring Jan Hus. Jan Hus was born in 1369, and became a Czech priest, philosopher, Master at Charles University in Prague, and an early Christian reformer. After John Wycliffe from England, Hus is considered the first Church reformer, as he lived a hundred years before Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli.

Hus was a key predecessor to Protestantism, and his teachings had a strong influence on Martin Luther. Foremost, he believed that mass should be given in the local language, rather than Latin, and he thus translated and preached in the vernacular, so that congregants could understand. He lifted up the importance of Scripture and preaching and teaching the Word.

He believed that ultimate authority came from God and the Bible, and that the church is not a hierarchy; that head of the Church was Jesus Christ, not the Pope, and that the body of the church was everyone else, not the Cardinals. Thus, he believed it is Jesus Christ to which one must obey to be saved, not the pope.

He believed that for communion, the cup be given to the people, not reserved only for the priest, and that communion be celebrated more regularly. He disapproved of the riches and guild of the Church at the time, preferring a simple chapel in which to worship. When Jan Hus was challenged by the human authorities of the Church and refused to confess that he had made a mistake and would thus further renounce, recant and declare the opposite of his beliefs, he was burned at the stake in the year 1415, for heresy against the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church.

The monument in Old Town Square in Prague was unveiled in 1915 to commemorate the 500th anniversary the martyrdom of Jan Hus.

When Czechoslovakia was under Communist rule, from 1948-1989, sitting at the feet of the Jan Hus memorial became a way of quietly expressing one's opinion and opposition against Communist control.

On December 18, 1999, Pope John Paul II apologized for the execution of Jan Hus.

A hundred years after Jan Hus' death, Desiderius Erasmus, another reformer and Dutch educator, published the first version of the New Testament in Greek, the common language of the early church. A printed version of the Greek New Testament meant that what had been available only to a few was now available to many: the Gospel in its original language. He published a second volume in 1519 that replaced the Latin text with his own fresh translation. This was the edition that Martin Luther used to translate the New Testament into German in 1522. With the development of the printing press, then came the English-language Bibles such as the Geneva version in 1560, in which John Calvin had a hand, and the King James' version in 1611, both of which were strongly influenced by Erasmus. The reformation of the church began with the reformation of the Bible.

Today, Reformation Sunday, commemorates the publication of the Ninety Five Theses by Martin Luther. This coming year marks the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary. In Luther's Ninety Five Theses, or Disputation on the Power of Indulgences, he disputes the claim that freedom from God's punishment for sin, or God's forgiveness, could be purchased with money, called plenary indulgences. Luther sent the *Theses* to Albert of Brandenburg, the Archbishop of Mainz, Germany, on October 31, 1517, the date now considered the start of the Protestant Reformation. Luther may have also posted or nailed the *Theses* on the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg, Germany, as legend has it.

This past June, Pope Francis praised Luther as a great reformer. He is currently taking part in 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemorations of the Protestant Reformation, of which many of the concerns the Catholic Church has since adopted.

The reformers proclaimed that the idea that "only the righteous could be saved" as problematic and unbiblical. They realized through careful study of the Bible that righteousness isn't the standard God sets for us, but rather the gift God gives to us. Righteousness is not a requirement, but a promise.

This promise is what the men in San Quentin and Zacchaeus experience when they enter God's realm. God's grace bails us out of the various prisons we inhabit. God's grace cannot be bought. It is a gift, and when received, compels a response. The response Zacchaeus shows is that of immediate repentance and making amends to those he has harmed. Zacchaeus receives God's grace through the meeting of Jesus Christ, and then extends that grace to others, out of gratitude. This is what I witnessed in the men in the spiritual groups at San Quentin. They had experienced God's forgiveness, and were reforming their lives by extending God's grace to others, including to me. We are saved by grace through faith.

The roots of our denomination, Presbyterianism, lie in the European Reformation of the 16th century, which traces its origins to Scotland, and with John Calvin being particularly influential.

A hymn was written for the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of John Calvin's birth, summing up his reformed theology. Let us honor our reformation history, grateful that we belong to the church reformed, and always to be reformed according to the Word of God, by singing this hymn now together, hymn #694, *Great God of Every Blessing*.