

SERMON: "STORIES OF HOSPITALITY ... JESUS & ZACCHAEUS"
TEXTS: OLD TESTAMENT LEVITICUS 19:9-10
NEW TESTAMENT LUKE 19:1-10

October 26, 2025
Reformation Sunday

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INTRODUCTION

Dave Feltman, who was the pastor to the presbytery for many years handed out these little cards to the pastors in our cohort. A reminder meant to help us through possible arguments ahead, especially when molehills are made into mountains

I'll pass them out for you to read it, think about it for a bit, then pass it on
Whoever gets it last, just put it in the offering plate please (an appropriate place)
We will come back around to that question a little later

Let's begin with a few words about Christian nationalism – what is it?
And what, if anything, does it have to do with Jesus of Nazareth
Here is a simple definition from the folks at Brittanica, the encyclopedia people

Show image with definition of Christian nationalism

There are multiple examples of this in our day and time in varying degrees of how the power of the state is used to promote and enforce (key word there - enforce) a moral code – posting the ten commandments in schools, rewriting American history, passing legislation about who can use what bathroom, etc.

I think Reformation Sunday is a good day to talk about Christian nationalism
When Martin Luther posted his 95 theses on the church door, he did so not to break from the catholic church but to invite a discourse – let's talk
I do the same today to ask a question, "Where is Christ in Christian nationalism?"

This is where we loop back round to the question on that card, "what matters to Jesus?"
A friend asked a great question at a recent meeting, she asked, "What about the people who argue their point with 'The bible says?'" I answered her with another question
"what does the bible say the most, what does Jesus say and do the most?"

Our faith is wobbly, and can get off track, if we don't build it on a strong foundation
Shouldn't that foundation be on Jesus, what he says and does the most?
The bible may say something about someone's sexuality in a few places
But does Jesus? Is that his message, his agenda?

Did he go around taking bad about any group of people? Read the gospels
Who does Jesus criticize? Just one group of people – religious authorities who are all about being right, all about their rules ... Sound familiar?
Shouldn't that humble us church folk a bit?

JESUS DID WHAT?

That is my problem with Christian nationalism. I think it has far more in common with the Pharisees of Jesus's day than it does with Jesus – his example his teaching, the things and the people that, matter to Jesus ... based on how many stories there are in the gospels share and repeat that focus

Show image with question, "What matters to Jesus?"

Reading through Matthew, Mark, Luke and John ... I see clear patterns over and over again. Jesus goes out of his way to include, not exclude! He heals the sick, touches the untouchables, eats with outcasts That includes the stories of hospitality we are looking at this stewardship season as we consider what it looks like when we work to be 'A Place for Everyone.'

That includes a man like Zaccheus – a tax collector, chief tax collector ... for Rome Not an IRS employee. Think traitor, taking taxes for Rome, skimming off the top You'd think Jesus would be critical of the man, talk about the greed, the corruption But what does Jesus do? He invites himself to dinner with the man!

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."

You see what each character in the drama does? They are each a sermon in and of themselves. All three – Jesus, who invites himself to dinner with 'that guy' Zaccheus who hurries down and is happy (relieved) to welcome Jesus And the crowd who grumble about Jesus gone to be a guest of a sinner

I might ask ... which of these might you be? Might you be one of those who grumbled? Easy to grumble, isn't it? There he goes again, Jesus picking the wrong team I'd suggest you work to avoid being a grumbler. Going back to how I started, I'd also suggest grumbling often leads to a religious nationalism that is far too focused on what one person or group thinks is wrong with or about another

No, I'd be so bold to suggest you consider playing the role of Zaccheus Jesus knows your sin and shortcomings just as well as he knew Zaccheus' and he still invites himself into your home and heart. Why? Because sinners whatever their sin, selfishness or self-righteousness, matter to Jesus

Over and over again Jesus goes out of the way to invite himself in. Why? Because people especially people on the outs, the ones we might grumble about, matter to him

REPENTANCE AS RESPONSE

Isn't that the story of Jesus? He's the one taking the initiative to show us how much he loves us – stopping to talk to the grown man who climbed a tree and just like that changes the narrative about Zack from 'fool out on a limb' to guy Jesus took the time to stop and talk to and have dinner with

That is who Jesus is. That is what Jesus does. And in response, Zaccheaus gets down out of the tree, welcomes Jesus and says

“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.”

Did you notice all the paper spread across the front doors of the church? It is a nice tradition Johnny started a few years back. He taped up Luther's 95 Theses on our church doors. Check them out on the way out, especially the first few about 'repentance.' Luther wrote, "Jesus willed that the whole life of believers should be one of repentance." I'd add ... repentance as a response to Jesus' love.

That is what Zaccheaus did in response to the love and hospitality Jesus showed him He changed his ways. He went from taking to giving, from greed to generosity He gave because he received, because he received Christ's love Isn't that why we give? We give back!

I'm glad I was on the schedule for the children's sermon today I've been wanting to show you that exercise with the jar and how to fill it We build our faith, our view of the world, with the big things first And the biggest of those, by far, is the gift that is God's love in Jesus Christ A love that goes out of its way to the likes of Zaccheaus, to you and to me

I really think it is simple. Three big things in order. Start with these. Build on these One - God loves me and you and us and them. Number one Then with a big "therefore" based on God's initiating and amazing grace The two great commandments according to Jesus - love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength AND love your neighbor as yourself

That is what happens here in this story – Jesus takes the initiative God's love comes first. Then Zaccheaus responds with his repentance Loving God by loving neighbor ... Giving to the poor, making amends for his fraud

That is what happens in our stories. God's love first. Then our response. You probably noticed how this story ends, the way Jesus describes himself by saying what matters most to him, that last verse ...

“For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

SUMMARY

Zaccheaus went out on a limb to see Jesus, probably to get his attention
It worked. That encounter changed the course of his life. Look at what
Zaccheaus (Zack) does in response to Jesus' divine initiative. His response
to Jesus' inviting himself to Zaccheaus' home is spelled out with enough detail.

This is a stewardship sermon, maybe I should do the math based on Zaccheaus intent
to give back and come clean – payinf back four times as much. Then ask
what that math would look like for you ... in a percentage or in dollars

The Stewardship & Finance committee, the Session and the staff do great work
every year spelling that out for you in the stewardship brochure. You'll get it
in the mail soon. I very much appreciate their work and attention to detail
That work helps us plan for ministry down the road.

But, let me wrap it up moving back to what, I'd claim, is the big thing
in the story of Zaccheaus, in the stories of the gospel accounts of Jesus' life,
and in our unique life stories. Back to the question about where Jesus is
in all of this (whether it be in Christian nationalism or to narrow it down in
how you are trying to follow Christ in this nation in and through these days)

You hear me say it at Easter every year, and often on other occasions
Where is Jesus? He is on the loose - not behind a velvet rope
not behind a bully pulpit, not always where we think he should be
He's very much on the loose, always seeming to go out of his way to invite
someone in ... someone on the outs, someone in a pew, someone online

Why, because we all matter to Jesus,
You and me, us and them matter to Jesus