



JESUS: The Savior

Luke 19:1-10

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We've been considering this month the identities of Jesus as we learn what it means to follow in the footsteps of the Lord. We've looked at Jesus as a wandering vagabond; we've followed Jesus the party person from dinner party to dinner party; and we've studied how Jesus was in the practice of wrecking the familiar understanding of home. Today we take a look at an identity that is more familiar as we learn about Jesus the Savior. What does it mean for Jesus to save? How did he save? And if we are to be like Christ, are we too expected to be in the practice of saving others?

We are introduced to the idea of Jesus as savior before Jesus was even born. Mary was pregnant with Jesus when the angels of the Lord visited her and Joseph. In Matthew's gospel we read that the angel appeared to Joseph and said, "[Mary] will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." From the time of his conception, God was declaring the Son was coming to save us from our sins.

The idea of Jesus as one who will save us is expanded in chapter 20 of Luke's Gospel, where we find the Parable of the Wicked Tenants. Jesus, speaking to the Pharisees, the leaders of the Jewish temple, says, "A man planted a vineyard, and leased it to tenants, and went to another country for a long time. When the season came, he sent a slave to the tenants in order that they might give him his share of the produce of the vineyard; but the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed." ... The man did the same again with a second slave, and then a third. Each time, the tenants beat the slave and throw them out empty-handed. Jesus continues, "The owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.' But when the tenants saw him, they discussed it among themselves and said, 'This is the heir; let us kill him so that the inheritance may be ours.' So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him."

As he concludes the parable, Jesus likens himself to the son, referencing the Hebrew scripture that says, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." "Jesus' parable is a revelation of what God is up to. The Creator, having waited for us to come back home like the Prodigal Son, and having tried various devices (giving the law, sending the prophets), decided to risk all and send the Son out to the far country to rescue us from ourselves."ⁱ

God had tried to save us in other ways. God had tried to correct our behavior. God had given us the law to help teach us to live rightly, but we rebelled against the law. God sent the prophets to offer personal instruction, but again we rebelled against their teaching. God saw that no method of instruction was working, so instead of sending Jesus to offer just another method of redirecting the faithful back to faithfulness, God sent Jesus to save us from our inability to refrain from sin. "To save' means, in the Greek, everything from 'rescue,' or 'liberate,' to 'heal,' or 'comfort.'"ⁱⁱ Jesus exemplifies each in his ministry. We could not rescue ourselves from the temptation of sin, so God sent Jesus to rescue us. We could not break free from the captivity of sin, so God send Jesus to

liberate us. We could not heal ourselves from the pain of sin, so God sent Jesus to heal us. We could not comfort ourselves because of the guilt of sin, so God sent Jesus to comfort us. In reading the scriptures, we find Jesus not only saved people in his ministry in each of these ways, but he taught about the saving work of God time and time again.

Yet, Jesus' act of saving wasn't appreciated by everyone. Because of his practice and his teachings, "Jesus got into all manner of trouble because of whom he saved. Jesus saved people who nobody thought could be saved or even wanted saved."ⁱⁱⁱ From the leper, to the blind man, to the bleeding woman, to the woman at the well, to the tax-collector, to the lame man, to the condemned, and to the crucified thief – Jesus saved those who society had found unwelcome. Jesus makes clear in his teaching and actions that he did not come just to save the wealthy or the powerful, he didn't come just to offer privilege or prosperity to those who worked hard, he didn't come to ensure that only those who could afford it had the ability to be healed, he didn't only welcome those who the mainstream culture said were welcome. "To the outcasts who thought God had said no to them, Jesus was God's great yes."^{iv}

Let's just look at a few of the parables that make this saving work clear:

- In the Parable of the Lost Sheep, Jesus talks about the one sheep who goes wandering off. "Which of you," Jesus asks, "having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices ... Just so," he continues, "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance."
- In the Parable of the Lost Coin, Jesus talks about the woman who lost her one silver coin. She will, of course, search the house until she finds it. Upon finding it, she will call her friends over and celebrate over the coin which has been found.
- In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus tells us about the celebration of the Father whose son has returned home after squandering his inheritance prematurely. The Father comes out, puts his robe on the son, and throws a grand party because the son has returned home.
- In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus tells us about a man who is lying half-dead on the side of the road. He explains that the one who is faithful is the one who, putting aside any preconceived cultural expectations, takes the man, puts him on his animal, takes him to a hostel and pays for his care and his stay.
- In the Parable of the Weeds among the Wheat, Jesus talks about a farmer who had sowed his good seed in the field, but whose field was flooded with weeds by an enemy. The slaves came and asked him if they should take out the weeds. The farmer says no, to collect it all at harvest time. "This is farming Jesus-style. A dragnet full of creatures 'both good and bad' is hauled into the boat ... The Master seems to find more joy in careless sowing, miraculous growing, and reckless harvesting than in taxonomy of the good from the bad, the worthwhile from the worthless, the saved from the damned."^v

These are stories that explain the reckless extravagance of salvation. While many a preacher, myself included, may stand in the pulpit and say this is what we are supposed to be doing as faithful followers of Christ, I don't think any of us, myself included, would act in these unseemly

ways without great hesitance. It's not common for us to invite friends over to wine and dine over the discovery of a lost coin in the couch. It's not common for us would throw a block party to welcome home a child who had wasted half our financial investments at their demand to receive their inheritance prior to our death. It's not common for us to stop and pick up a beaten and dying person from the side of the road, putting their bloodied bodies in our fancy cars, and agreeing to pay the medical expenses required to bring them back to full health. As a nation we can't even agree that we're willing to pay a little extra to provide health care for others, much less to pay the full medical bill for a person found dying on the side of the road.

I don't think many of us would act in these ways. "But these are not stories about us. These are God's stories: God the searching shepherd, the careless farmer, the undiscerning fisherman, the reckless woman, the extravagant father, the prodigal Samaritan. Jesus reveals a God who is no reticent, reclusive deity. This God comes out to seek and to save the lost."^{vi}

God sends Jesus to seek and to save the lost. Let's take a look at our scripture reading for today, remembering the story of Zacchaeus. Perhaps if you've grown up in the church you've long known the story of Zacchaeus. *Zacchaeus was a wee little man, a wee little man was he. He climbed up in that Sycamore tree for the Lord he wanted to see. And as the Savior past that way he looked up in that tree, and he said, 'Zacchaeus, you come down, for I'm going to your house today. I'm going to your house today.'*

Zacchaeus was an outcast in Jericho, perhaps even defined as a hated man. He was not just any tax collector; he was the *chief* tax collector. "All tax collectors, by definition, are wealthy; they purchase the right to collect taxes and profit from what they charge above what they owe the empire."^{vii} As the chief tax collector, he wasn't just wealthy; in Luke's narrative, we are told he is flat out *rich*. Zacchaeus was, by all accounts, Caesar's henchman in the community. He is seen as a representative and collaborator with the imposing government of Rome. Even though he is Jewish, he is an outcast because of his occupation.

Jesus is said to be coming in to town. He had picked up a following, and as he travelled, people were made aware of his expected arrival. As Jesus begins to enter town, lines form on both sides of the road. People want to see this man who is said to have healed the sick, made the lame to walk, and given sight to the blind. As an outcast, Zacchaeus is not welcomed on the front line to see Jesus. He is pushed back, squeezed out, and forced to stand behind others. Unfortunately for him, Zacchaeus is short in stature. He is not tall enough to see Jesus from the back of the crowds. Yet he's determined, he wants to see this man hailed as a miracle worker. Zacchaeus needs better vantage point. Now, Sycamore trees grow very thick branches, and can be great trees for climbing. So, Zacchaeus climbs a Sycamore tree to have a better chance to see Jesus as he walks by.

Jesus comes by and stops just there below the tree. Zacchaeus must be feeling great. 'I picked the right spot,' he thinks. 'Here this miracle worker has stopped right in front of me. Maybe I'll get to witness the next miracle from my awesome vantage point.'

But Jesus does the unexpected. He looks up into the tree and see Zacchaeus. Before he speaks, can you imagine what must be going through Zacchaeus' mind? This man is a hated man by the

community. He is labeled a traitor, who supports the oppressors. The last thing he wants is to draw attention to himself amidst the large gathering that has formed on the street. 'Oh no,' he's probably thinking, 'he sees me! Why did I climb this stupid tree? What was I thinking!?' Just keep walking, you miracle worker, you. Nothing to see here, keep going!

Jesus speaks, 'Zacchaeus, come on down. I'm heading to your house to stay.'

Now Zacchaeus is trapped. He's literally gone out on a limb, and Jesus says, I'm coming to your home and you're cooking for me today. Zacchaeus can't say no. "It is not just important that wanderers be offered food, and it is not just a duty that must be performed. It is an honor to be able to share the goodness of creation with a wanderer."^{viii} Zacchaeus, the least likely person for Jesus to visit according to societal standards, is the very one who Jesus decides to visit and with whom he will stay. "Jesus, never one to pass up an opportunity for a free meal at the wrong place, promptly invites himself to dinner at the old reprobate's house, once again intruding, pushing into where he is not wanted."^{ix}

Jesus's insistence on going to Zacchaeus's house signals a paradigm shift that will alter Zacchaeus's life. "Table fellowship, by Pharisaic standards, denotes not merely friendliness but parity and acceptance. To sit at the table with someone indicates approval of that person, and Jesus seems to be approving of Zacchaeus's sinful life."^x Jesus, the rabbi, even attending a dinner party at the house of the outcast, offers a change in how the community will view Zacchaeus. The salvation of God is not just about personal liberation, but has at its core the reconciliation of community.

Such an act is not missed by the scripture. We read in verse 7, "All who saw it began to grumble and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.'" They are not only shocked, but they are upset. If Jesus gives credibility to Zacchaeus – if the miracle working rabbi dines with Zacchaeus – the community will have no excuse for not welcoming him and accepting him as friend among them.

Back at Zacchaeus' house, we are made privy to the private practices of Zacchaeus. The verb tense used in the Greek to describe Zacchaeus's speaking is the present active indicative. He says to Jesus, "Lord, **I give** half my possessions to the poor. **I give** fourfold back to any person I have defrauded." Zacchaeus is not making promises to Jesus that he will change his life – he is naming to Jesus all that he already doing! The community has outcast this man because of how they perceived him based on his visible occupation. But this man is already living according to the grace and love of God. Jesus says to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham.'

"Salvation is whenever Jesus intrudes into your space, whenever Jesus makes your sinful table the site of his salvation feast. Salvation is what Jesus did for Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus didn't have to invite Jesus to dinner. Jesus invited himself. Hardly anyone in Scripture chooses Jesus or decides to be saved by him. ... The gospel is a story about Jesus' choices and decisions for the lost, not our choices and decisions for Jesus. ... Salvation is not something that we do; it is what Jesus does."^{xi}

This is why Jesus came – to reconnect to God and to the community those who have been lost, left out, and forgotten. So how do we fit into such a divine plan? There is a Savior, and we are not him, so how do we live into the call to follow in the footsteps of Christ, in his role as Savior?

We may not have the eternal power to save one’s soul – that is God’s work – but we are given the instruction to reconcile the community toward equality and justice. We do not have the final say over the invitation list to the kingdom of God, but we get full control over who joins us in the work of God in the world today.

It’s too easy to see people in our world and in our community and choose to outcast them because we don’t agree with their occupation, skin color, political leanings, or personal actions. We can chastise those who take knees, and belittle those who don’t understand why people take a knee. We can outcast those who protest, and shame those who refuse to get involved. We can deride those who have great wealth, and we can embarrass those who rely on welfare. We can mock those who vote left, and humiliate those who vote right. We can distrust those who are not citizens, and discredit those who call for stricter immigration laws. We can tear down those who want to build walls, and we can blame those who want to destroy them. We can Bible thump those who stand for equality, and smear those who hold traditional values.

But the great call of God as witnessed in the work of Jesus Christ as Savior is not to tear down or belittle, it’s not to cast out or embarrass, it’s not to smear or deride, it’s not to shame or chastise, it’s not to thump or to humiliate. The work of God in Jesus Christ as the Savior of all is to embrace and unite. The work of God in Jesus Christ as Savior is to welcome and to nurture. The work of God in Jesus Christ as Savior is to seek out and celebrate those who were lost and who are now found. This is the very purpose of Jesus’ life and ministry, to save the lost - that includes you and me. So as a body of the saved, may we join in the great work of God that doesn’t give in to the invitation of the society to cast out and divide, but to unite and join, to listen and understand, to share in the pain and joy, and to stand on the side of justice and reconciliation that continues Christ’s saving work in the world by offering love, by welcoming mercy, and by rejoicing in the divine work of reconciliation.

For the glory of God, we give thanks for the Savior. Amen.

ⁱ William H. Willimon. *Why Jesus?* Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} E. Elizabeth Johnson. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year C, Volume 4.* Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010.

^{viii} Richard W. Swanson. *Provoking the Gospel of Luke: A Storyteller’s Commentary.* The Pilgrim Press: Cleveland, 2006.

^{ix} Willimon.

^x Johnson.

^{xi} Willimon.