

Either Way, He's Loved  
A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington  
Rev. Reebee Kavich Girash  
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Luke 19:1-10

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it. <sup>2</sup>A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax-collector and was rich. <sup>3</sup>He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. <sup>4</sup>So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. <sup>5</sup>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.' <sup>6</sup>So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. <sup>7</sup>All who saw it began to grumble and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.' <sup>8</sup>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.' <sup>9</sup>Then Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. <sup>10</sup>For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.'

### *Sermon*

Ikarus Jackson can fly. There is a children's book, ***Wings***<sup>1</sup>, by African-American author and artist Christopher Myers, that tells the story of young Ikarus Jackson. Ikarus has wings, of course.

Adults, when reading the story of Ikarus Jackson, know the allusion. The Icarus of mythology builds wings and flies, higher and higher, defying his father's warning, until the heat of the sun melts his wings and he falls to the sea and drowns.

In Chris Myers's story, the only things Ikarus Jackson shares with the ancient myth are wings and a name. In this lovely and poignant children's book, Ikarus is a new child in the narrator's class. No one in the class, no one in the neighborhood, no one in the school is able to accept Ikarus' wings. "Look at that strange boy. Everyone in the neighborhood pointed at him." He arrives at the beginning of the story with strong, wonderful wings - and then the teacher tells him to leave class because people cannot see the board around his wings. On the playground, all the children laugh when they

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.publishersweekly.com/9780590033770>

see him flying. “Their words sent Ikarus drifting away..he struggled to stay in the air...his head hung low.” The narrator knows how Ikarus feels - laughed at - for they have been laughed at, too. But then the narrator summons their own courage and calls out: Leave Ikarus alone! And the crowds do. They stop their grumbling. Then the narrator turns to Ikarus, “I told him what someone should have long ago. Your flying is beautiful. For the first time, I saw Ikarus smile...Look at that amazing boy, I called to all the people as I pointed to my new friend Ikarus swirling through the sky.”

As Chris Myers imagines Ikarus, friendship and affirmation allow someone rejected by their community to dance and swirl and fly up into the sky.

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Luke’s community would have known what Zacchaeus’ name means.

The name Zacchaeus means clean. Innocent. *Righteous*.

Does Luke want us to think his name is ironic, or does he want us to see something in Zacchaeus that the crowd does not see?

Zacchaeus is a tax collector, a chief-tax collector, a very rich man, and most importantly for the crowd of poor and marginalized folk that followed Jesus around, a Roman collaborator. Everything this crowd knew about him would have built up their resentment of Zacchaeus - the economic system he personified was not *just* lopsided toward taking ancient Palestinian resources for the Romans, it was not just lopsided - it was unfair, corrupt, and oppressive.

And for the past seven chapters, by the way, Luke had been highlighting economic injustice in parable and story by challenging the rich.

But in one of Luke’s last tales before Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, there are some twists.

The tax collector is so curious about Jesus, he climbs a tree to get a glimpse. (Jesus, who has been preaching economic justice.) Jesus looks up into the tree and does not say, Woe is you, Zacchaeus. Instead he says, Let’s have dinner at your house. And Zacchaeus does not flip out in shame filled horror and run back to the treasury. He responds to Jesus with joy. He’s happy. He’s joyful, and he’s changed.

When Jesus calls him by name, Zacchaeus lives into his name.

Either Zacchaeus is righteous and loved,

Or he is sinful and loved,  
Or maybe he is both righteous and sinful and loved.  
Either way, he's loved.

Either I am righteous and loved,  
Or I am sinful and loved,  
Or maybe I am both righteous and sinful and loved.  
Maybe, I am loved.  
Actually, I can say it for sure,  
Because the Bible tells me so,  
I am loved.

Either you are righteous and loved,  
Or you are sinful and loved,  
Or maybe you are both righteous and sinful and loved.  
Either way, you are loved.  
We can say it for sure,  
Because the Bible tells us so,  
You are loved.

This is a story that surprises us - but perhaps it should not. One of the consistent messages of Jesus is that everyone is loved, everyone is redeemable, and we can and should see everyone's potential. We should not be surprised that Zacchaeus could be redeemed. We should not act like the crowds. Rather, we should call people by name and call them with love and call them into new life and a new way of living.

Jesus called Zacchaeus to new life - to a new way of understanding the world and a different and more righteous way of participating in the economy. No more would Zacchaeus oppress for his own gain. Instead, he 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.' "

And this is what salvation means here - as Audrey West writes,

"That is how salvation works. We do not have to put things in order first, because salvation is not about being neat and orderly. It is not about making things look good, not about what we do, not about fitting into the world's stereotypes; it's not about the good or bad labels by which we are known to ourselves or others. Before even announcing his newfound spirit of generosity and restitution, Zacchaeus learns that

Jesus is coming to see 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.”<sup>2</sup>

Now, let me put an endnote on this sermon, and since we are in stewardship season let me make a connection plain.

So often we separate ourselves from Zacchaeus, from the rich man / the bad man in the stories - we are the crowd that condemns. But we are Zacchaeus, too. Jesus talked about money and just use of resources a lot - in modern terms, over and over again he asked people to align their budget with their values, to use their resources for good, to pay attention to their neighbors, especially the poor, the widows, the children, the sojourners. Jesus’ vision was for a kingdom in which everyone had enough - and part of that vision was that no one should keep more than their share. In this story, when Jesus calls Zacchaeus by name, the Greek says Zacchaeus stops - *he stands still*. Ched Myers says, “ To stop in one’s tracks—taking the time and attention to *hear* and *feel* the cry of the poor rather than walking past—is Zacchaeus’ second step of liberation.”<sup>3</sup> Within this tale, we can see Zacchaeus doing two things we should emulate - welcoming Jesus with joy - and using our resources righteously, justly.

Maybe we are all Zacchaeus - that is to say, innocent and righteous and sinful and troubled and beloved and seen and loved by God in all of it. And if we are all Zacchaeus, the next question becomes: how will we respond with joy and happiness when we get to welcome Jesus? How will we fly?

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Christian Century, October 16, 2007

<sup>3</sup> <https://radicaldiscipleship.net/2022/10/28/salvation-as-wealth-redistribution/>