

## Jesus Transforms Lives

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers  
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,  
on Sunday, October 30, 2022.

Luke 19:1-10

Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector, which meant that he probably wasn't very well liked in the community. He was the IRS agent of his day. If you ever meet an IRS agent, it's probably because you're being audited -- not an experience most people want to have.

Back in Jesus' day, tax collectors, generally speaking, were a despised group of people. First-century Palestine was under Roman occupation, and tax collectors like Zacchaeus were considered collaborators participating in a corrupt system of taxation. What's more, the text also tells us that Zacchaeus was rich, and so he was doubly despised. First-century Palestine was considered a zero-sum society in which one person's gain was another person's loss. So, in those days, people who were rich, who had gained more than their fair share of society's resources, were looked upon as thieves.

As Luke tells the story, Jesus was passing through Jericho on his way to Jerusalem. For some reason, Zacchaeus really wanted to see Jesus in person as he came through the city. Maybe it was because he had heard about Jesus' reputation -- that he was a friend to tax collectors and sinners. He wanted to see who this Jesus was. But as often happened to Jesus, he was surrounded by a crowd. There was excitement in the air. Throngs of people walked along with him as he passed through the city.

This presented a problem for Zacchaeus, because he was short and he couldn't see over peoples' heads. I imagine him on the edge of the crowd, straining his neck, jumping up and down to see if he could catch a glimpse of Jesus, but without success. He

was determined, though. He wasn't going to let a crowd keep him from seeing Jesus with his own eyes. This might be his only opportunity! Somehow he needed to find a higher vantage point from which he could see over the heads of the crowd.

He ran ahead and found a sycamore tree along the route that Jesus was walking. He climbed up into the tree and waited there until Jesus passed by. But when Jesus finally got to the tree, Zacchaeus got more than he bargained for. Not only did he see Jesus, Jesus saw him, and called up to him: "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today."

What a surprise this must have been for Zacchaeus! And what an honor! Here he was a rich tax collector, hated by virtually everyone, ostracized by the whole community, and yet this person Jesus wanted to stay at his house! Apparently, the rumors were true! Jesus really was a friend of tax collectors and sinners! Zacchaeus hurried down from the tree and welcomed Jesus with great joy.

Now, all the people who saw this started grumbling about it. Jesus was going to be a guest in the home of a sinner! What kind of holy man associates with sinners -- a rich tax collector, no less!

But the next thing we know, Zacchaeus is volunteering to give away half of his possessions to the poor and to repay fourfold anyone he has cheated. This must have been quite a surprise to those who heard him! Who would ever have imagined that this rich man -- the chief tax collector of Jericho -- would be so generous!

Zacchaeus' life is transformed in relationship to Jesus Christ. Jesus declares that salvation has come to Zacchaeus' house and that Zacchaeus himself is a child of Abraham. His relationship to the community has been restored.

Everyone in Jericho had written Zacchaeus off. Zacchaeus? He'll never change. He's a sinner. He's a collaborator. He's corrupt.

He's become rich at our expense. Who would want anything to do with him?

But Jesus didn't write Zacchaeus off. Jesus doesn't write anybody off. Even the life of a rich tax collector like Zacchaeus can be changed for the better. It's true for anyone! Even you and me! Even our lives can be transformed through a relationship with Jesus Christ. Whether we're struggling to make ends meet, wrestling with the demons of addiction, mourning the death of a loved one, grieving over the break up of a relationship, feeling stuck in a dead-end job, or coping with chronic pain, Jesus can transform our lives. Jesus can bring us healing and hope. Jesus can make us whole.

Like Zacchaeus, we, too, are looking for Jesus. That's one of the things that brings us here to worship each Sunday. That's one of the reasons we are drawn to scripture. That's one of the desires that moves us to pray. We want to know who this Jesus is.

Like Zacchaeus, we, too, are called by name. Jesus knows who we are and calls each of us to be in relationship with him, to follow him, to be his disciples.

And like Zacchaeus, we have the opportunity to welcome Jesus into our homes and into our lives. Jesus wants to be part of our lives in order to transform them -- every aspect of our lives -- our spiritual lives, our work lives, our family lives, our public lives.

When Jesus came to the home of Zacchaeus, it moved Zacchaeus to be surprisingly generous, giving half of his possessions to the poor. Zacchaeus' story challenges us to be generous as well, as we consider our own giving.

As most of you know, we are in the midst of our fall stewardship campaign, when we ask everyone in the congregation to prayerfully consider making a 2023 financial pledge to St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in support of the good work that

God is doing in and through our congregation. If you are a member or friend of St. Andrew, you should have received a pledge packet a couple of weeks ago containing a letter, a narrative budget, and a pledge card. If you didn't, please let me know.

The letter offered four reasons you might want to support St. Andrew with a financial pledge:

- Because you want to make the world a better place, and you know that St. Andrew feeds the hungry, helps the poor, works for social justice, and spreads the good news of God's love.
- Because you value being part of a church that is welcoming and inclusive, accepting of everyone, and you find a sense of belonging here.
- Because you want to grow spiritually, and you know that at St. Andrew we understand spiritual growth to be a life-long journey.
- Because you are seeking a deeper relationship with God, and when you worship with us God feels just a little bit closer.

As you ponder your financial pledge for next year, take a moment to think about the ways in which God has touched your life, nourished your spirit, and helped others through St. Andrew Presbyterian Church.

Rest assured, we are not asking you to give away half of what you own, as Zacchaeus did. All we ask is that you make your best estimate of what you think you will be able to give to the church next year so that the Finance Committee and the Session can be responsible about planning the church's budget for 2023.

We are all well aware that these are uncertain economic times with high inflation and volatile financial markets. We don't know what the future will bring. So, if your circumstances change sometime next year and you cannot fulfill your entire pledge, we will certainly understand.

Stewardship Commitment Sunday is next Sunday, November 6. If you have not already returned your pledge card, we ask that you bring it with you and put it in the offering basket next Sunday, when we will dedicate our pledges to God.

God has been generous to us. May we be generous in return. If you think about it, all that we have ultimately comes from God. Even our very lives are a gift from God! We come into this world with nothing and we will leave this world with nothing. We are simply stewards of that which God entrusts to our care while we are here on earth. So, let us be generous in sharing from the resources that God has given us – our money, our time, our talents.

Jesus teaches us that life does not consist in the abundance of our possessions but in the generosity of our giving from all that we possess. It is in giving selflessly to others that we may grow rich toward God. So, may we be generous people and find new wealth in our relationship with God. Amen.