

August 28, 2022

Come to the Table
1 Samuel 25 | Luke 19

I was once the pastor to Scrooge McDuck. When I was in my twenties and he was in his nineties, he was a member of my congregation. McDuck's bank held the mortgage on every house in town. He was the underwriter to every insurance policy. His firm invested the savings of all the local workers. His name was printed in the corner of my paycheck. I would go and visit him in his office to talk about church things. His secretary would greet me in the lobby and we'd walk past a steel door with a captain's wheel before turning up a staircase. I realized that his desk sat directly over the vault. He was an old man so rich he bathed every night in a pool of gold coins. He was a famous local grouch. People who met him on the sidewalks rarely recognized him as the banker, but they all knew him as a grumpy old man.

As his pastor it was my job to bring him to Jesus, and I did my best, but he wasn't easy to talk to. In those days I purchased for all of the students in the Confirmation class a nice leatherbound Bible. I wrote notes to all the students on the inside and presented it to them as a gift when they finished the course. One year a student in the Confirmation class wound up moving away with her family. She didn't complete the course, so in May at the end of the school year I was left with an extra Bible. "I know just who could use this," I thought. So I called the bank and made an appointment with Mr. McDuck. The next afternoon I walked down the street and followed his secretary past the safe, up the stairs, and sat down across his desk just over the vault.

"Is it stewardship season already?" he quacked. "I don't expect to hear from the minister until October."

"Not yet," I said. I have something for you," presenting him with the Bible. I don't think he was accustomed to receiving many gifts. And if he had suspicions about my visit they were well founded. I knew that the professional fundraisers with the booster club and the local college and the community foundation all came and sat in the chair I was sitting in.

"What is this?" I always gave the Confirmands very nice Bibles. It was a study Bible, maybe four inches thick, in the latest translation with commentary. I'd written a note to him on the dedication page.

"It's a study Bible."

"It's very nice. I've never seen such a nice Bible." He turned it over in his hands, even peeked briefly inside, and fingered the gold leafed pages. "Why did you bring me this?"

"I'm your pastor," I said. "If I don't share with you the Word of God I don't know who would."

"This is too nice," he said. "I can't accept this."

"It's just a Bible," I said. "I highlighted a few passages that might interest you." They were all the money passages. Deuteronomy's prohibitions on excessive debt. The prophets'

oracles on wealthy princes. The rich young man. The old farmer with storehouses of grain. Zaccheus and the sycamore tree.

He flopped the pages shut and dropped it onto the table with a thunk. “Thanks for your visit pastor. Say, how much does something like this cost?”

I think of old Scrooge every time we read the story of Zaccheus because they are both such characters. Three things interest me about the story of Zaccheus. First - Luke’s colorful description of him. He’s a rich man, but Luke emphasizes the detail that he’s a tax collector, suggesting that his wealth isn’t really his own. He’s a government employee. His pockets are padded with patronage and maybe some bribes. He’s so short that he can’t see over the crowd when Jesus comes to town. He has to climb a tree to have any view, and when Jesus addresses him he has to squirrel himself down to accept the invitation. What a great character - they should write a children’s song about him or something.

The second thing that interests me about Zaccheus is his loneliness. Think about the implications of all that Luke has said about him - short, privileged, greedy. He’s not an easily likable person. Most people find him annoying. Many resent him for his line of work. Others hate him for things he’s done that have affected them, or for all that he represents in public life. When Jesus addresses him, the crowd grumbles that Zaccheus is a sinner undeserving of such holy attention. They judge Jesus by association with him. He climbs the tree because he wants to belong. It’s the earnest curiosity of a child peering down through the leaves. He doesn’t expect to be noticed. Imagine his surprise when Jesus addresses him directly. It must have been an awkward few moments for everyone waiting for a grown man to descend limb by limb to the sidewalk. He got himself up there because he desired to participate.

The third thing that interests me about Zaccheus is his easy conversion. Jesus noticed him - and that’s all it took for him to change his whole life. This is no dramatic scene like Paul’s conversion on the Road to Damascus. There’s no slow process of awakening and recognition like in the stories of Peter or Thomas. This is not the inquisitive Nicodemus creeping up to Jesus in the dark of night. In the instant that Jesus sees him and acknowledges him, Zaccheus commits to changing his life. “If I have defrauded anyone,” he says, “I will pay back four times as much.” When Jesus announces the salvation of Zaccheus, he mentions how Zaccheus belongs to the community irrespective of all the things that have separated him from it. “He too is a child of Abraham and Sarah,” Jesus says.

Few conversions are so fast and easy as Zacchaeus. But all conversions - like Zaccheus’s - are the acceptance of our belonging in the family of God. In this context, wealth is just a device that functions as a symbol for anything that can come between us and our belonging in God’s family. We should take it easy on Mr. McDuck because you don’t have to be rich for money to come between you and God. And if money is not what separates me from God it’s probably something else - like religion, power, or identity. There is a Zaccheus in each one of us too short to see over that hedge we’ve built in our hearts so we’re climbing like children to the top of the

tree to get a glimpse of Jesus. With only a moment's look into the face of Christ, the hardness in our hearts would melt and we would give away like Zaccheus all that we have built to protect ourselves.

Today is the Celebration of Ministries. We have a fair in the fellowship hall of all the ministries of the church. Youth Group and choirs, Habitat builds and scholarship committees, vigils for racial justice; dozens of chances to help out and to pitch in with our outreach to the community. Today we make the invitation to one another. Come and be a part of all that God is doing in this place. Nobody here is Jesus, let me tell you. And our community often falls short of its highest aspirations. But these ministries are our best effort to approximate the love of God in this place and they reflect our sincere desire for all of God's children to have a place to belong. Some of us are insiders to this crowd already, so we can be naturally a bit prickly and judgmental. Others are newcomers to this place, maybe a little bashful with all that is unfamiliar. All of us are looking for the face of Christ to welcome us to the table. I want to invite you this fall to come and find your place here. Come to the table. No one can promise that it will be easy or comfortable to join with a community like this. We're all in some process of conversion - meaning that we all have little idols that come between us and the love of God. But we are earnestly seeking the true words of Jesus, that each of us belongs like Zaccheus in the family of Sarah and Abraham.

So come from the midst of the crowd. Come if you're new to this place. If you have climbed up to get a view, come down out of the tree. We seek to be a community shaped by the love of Christ. So it's possible that in the midst of these shared ministries, we might be seen and heard. It could happen here that Jesus notices me. There is a table here. A place is set for each of us.