### “To Seek Out and to Save” Steve Finlan for The First Church, Oct. 30, 2022

**Psalm 32:3–7**

3 While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long.4 For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. *Selah*

5 Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,” and you forgave the guilt of my sin. *Selah*

6 Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them.7 You are a hiding-place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.       *Selah*

**Luke 19:1–10**

1He entered Jericho and was passing through it. 2A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax-collector and was rich. 3He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. 4So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. 5When 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.” 6So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. 7All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” 8Zacchaeus 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.” 9Then Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. 10For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

As we often do, today we have two very different readings, but with common underlying themes. The psalm is a heart-felt description of the psalmist’s inner conflict. His admission of sin and guilt allow him to recognize God’s mercy. We know, from Jesus’ teaching, of God’s joy at the return of even one sinner. The psalmist knows he has drifted away from God. His own actions have hidden God’s light from him. The story goes further and relates that though he had sinned, God’s mercy has shone upon him. His remorse, his regrets, and his sincere desire to renew his life help him to align with God’s will.

Acknowledgement of one’s sinfulness also occurs in the other reading. Zacchaeus, once he has encountered Jesus, decides that he needs to confess that he may have defrauded some people by overtaxing them. Repudiation of one’s selfish behavior seems to be the first essential prerequisite to spiritual living.

Jesus speaks to this when he says “I have come to call not the righteous but sinners” (Luke 5:32). But he also refers to those who have a different experience, not one of sinfulness but of brokenness or sickness: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick” (Matt 9:12; Mark 2:17). You don’t seek out a doctor if you’re perfectly healthy.

One can feel the call to come to God either out of a state of sinfulness or out of a state of soul sickness or soul isolation and lostness. Zacchaeus seems to fit in the category of one who is *conscious* of being a sinner. Without any prompting from Jesus, he confesses that he may have overtaxed some people for his own gain, and promises to restore to them fourfold anything he unlawfully charged them. The presence of the Savior arouses in Zacchaeus a consciousness of his sinfulness and the need to repent and restore. He not only recognizes his sin but he desires to do better, in order to step back into the Light.

In the psalm, the speaker is most focused on awareness of sinfulness (“I acknowledged my sin to you” 32:5, he says), but it also includes a possible recognition of lostness or isolation, since he prays “you surround me with glad cries of deliverance” (32:7). Sickness, lostness, and sinfulness are all types of neediness. We usually don’t turn to God unless we realize we *need* God. We sometimes have to drift far away before we can recognize our condition. But God welcomes us back with open arms and mercy.

Zacchaeus recognized that he needed Jesus for his own moral transformation. He *needed* to make good on the wrongs he had done. He *needed*, also, to give half his possessions to the poor as compensation. Without responding to the specifics of what Zacchaeus has spontaneously promised to do, Jesus affirms the upshot of Zacchaeus’s change by saying “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham” (Luke 19:9).

In those days, people knew who their tax collector was. Many of them were known to be dishonest, overcharging and skimming some money for themselves. Even those who were honest were not well-liked because they were working for the empire. Many found it easy to label all tax-collectors as sinners.

Jesus is uplifting Zacchaeus, re-affirming his status as a Jew, asserting that salvation has come to him. Jesus shows respect to Zacchaeus, and this implies that we also should show respect for people whom others shun. Jesus built up Zacchaeus’s self-esteem by calling him a son of Abraham. We, too, can build up the self-esteem of others by noticing skills they have, or things they have achieved.

This story is ultimately a message about Jesus’ acceptance of people. And it comes through in the final saying: “For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). And “lost” is another category for describing people who need Jesus. I mentioned earlier that Jesus used the nouns “sinner” and “the sick” to describe those who needed Jesus’ help; now we have another category: the lost.

“Lost” might be the most inclusive category, because both sinners and the sick can fit in that category. Or perhaps “the lost” is a specific, separate, category, describing those who lack a good focus or purpose in life, who don’t really know where they are headed or for what they are seeking.

Zacchaeus was apparently helping himself to people’s money, but probably hadn’t thought it out very far. He really didn’t have a good focus or plan for his life. His encounter with Jesus brings out his suppressed desire to be a noble and decent son of Abraham. Now that becomes his new purpose. Zacchaeus is no longer lost. Actually, maybe that desire for good was already emerging within him when he went to the trouble of climbing a tree in order to see Jesus. In the experience, Zacchaeus “finds” himself. He finds a purpose. Just that encounter with Jesus is enough to bring about this change.

The Jericho crowd still grumbles and says “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner” (19:7). Yes, Jesus does, and it changes that sinner’s life forever!

Jesus was attuned to people and knew what they needed. He knew Zacchaeus needed a fatherly figure who would point him toward righteousness and lift his self-esteem. This experience made Zacchaeus ready to face criticism and accusations of unfairness because of his past actions. He was ready to admit to everything and make recompense to everyone. His life was changed by this encounter with Jesus.

Apparently this desire to do good and be responsible was lurking inside Zacchaeus, and the encounter with Jesus brought it out. The urge to be responsible can be life-changing. An anonymous author on the internet says that the first year of fatherhood changed him. He noticed how his son often imitated him, and it made him not want to do anything dangerous. He was apprehensive at first about being a good father, but he stuck with it. Being a responsible parent suddenly became the central focus of his—and his wife’s—lives. He had to give up certain things, but in hindsight, he did not think of this as a sacrifice. Love outweighed inconvenience. He gained a vivid sense of being fully alive, and also a confidence that spread to other areas of his life. (https://dailydad.com/how-the-first-year-of-fatherhood-changed-me/)

The sacred duty of raising a child can become the focus of one’s life. And the personal encounter with Jesus is another experience that can completely change a person. Jesus is still seeking out the sinner, the sick, the broken-hearted, the lonely, the lost, in order to turn around the sinner, heal the sick, embrace the broken-hearted, uplift the lonely, and help the lost to find meaning in life. He is still doing this today, don’t you know?

Has he embraced, or turned around, or healed you, or put meaning into your life? Can you become attuned to other people so that you can sense what they need? Can you become a little bit like Jesus in making yourself available to other people? Yes, you can become a good listener, a good appreciator of what people are going through spiritually. Learn to be attentive, and listen to the clues that people give you, so that you can be of service to them, and help to bring a little bit of heaven to earth.