

I don't really know how to speak into our current context. It feels odd that this sermon will just go straight to the website. Hopefully straight to website doesn't denote the same quality as films that go straight to video. I'm just going to dive in, and hopefully the text will meet each of us where we are at--even in the surreal times we're in.

Last week Allysen's sermon about the parables of the lost and found made me reflect on times when I've been lost. I like Allysen's Dog Tucker, have long been a wanderer.

When I was 17 I went for a point nine mile hike. That's short. From here to the skytrain short. It was early May, so the foothills of the Cascades still had plenty of snow. On the hike we followed others' footsteps, and pretty quickly arrived at the lake. We had lunch and a quick snowball fight and left. On our way back we soon noticed that we weren't noticing familiar things--Where was the fallen hemlock tree we had to climb over? Where were the distance markers?

Where was the trail?

Soon the footprints we were following stopped. But we weren't going to admit defeat that easily. We weren't lost. At least not in our minds. We figured the cars were down hill, so if we went down we'd be fine. So we went down. Through thickets of thorns, aptly named Devils' club. Through clear cuts and swollen creeks. Down and down to the bottom. And at the bottom there was no road, and there were no cars. But there was thick bush that continued on and on.

We walked until dusk. When we found a meadow we admitted we were lost and stopped. We didn't know which direction the road was. We didn't have a map. We didn't recognize any of the mountains. We were lost and we were stuck. That lost and stuck condition was one we earned ourselves. And so we huddled together, spooning for warmth, looked up and the stars and wondered how we could get unstuck.

Our story today is a story of how someone who was lost became found--it's the story of Zaccheus getting unstuck by Jesus. There are three main characters in the story: there's Jesus, Zaccheus and the crowd of grumblers. The good, the bad, and the grumbling. I'm pretty proud on the title. I'll pause and let you take it in. This is a story that speaks to us about the pain of isolation, and the joy of being reconciled through the work of Jesus.

Partly in response to the unfun experience of getting lost in the woods--I've developed a passion for maps. So before we get into our text today, I give y'all a map of the sermon.

First we're going set-up the story--give the story background and context: what's happening around this story in Luke, what wider themes are present and being built upon. Then we'll make our way through the story itself. We'll leave on reflections about where we find ourselves in the story, and how we can respond to Jesus.

Context. Story. Response.

The story of Zaccheus climbing a tree comes towards the end of Luke's Gospel. Zaccheus is nestled in Luke right before things start to escalate in Jerusalem--we are one enigmatic parable away from Holy Week. The drama is building. Central to the drama is a key theme in Jesus' life that Luke has been careful to highlight: the surprise answer of who is in and who is out.

In Luke, Jesus expands and redefines the covenant community. The borderlines between the in-crowd and the out-crowd shift. We can spot this redefinition and theme whenever Abraham's family is brought up.

In Luke three--John the Baptist fiercely warned folks not to trust in their heritage for their in-crowd status, saying: *"And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham."*

Again in chapter 13, Jesus heals a women who had been bleeding for 13 years. Who had been unclean and cut-off from the covenant community. When Jesus healed her, and heard the grumbling of the in-crowd Synagogue leader, Jesus replied not gently, saying: *"You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? **16** Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?"*

Then in chapter 16 Jesus tells this story about Lazarus the beggar and the rich man in fancy clothes. At the end of the story--it wasn't the fancy-man who was the in-crowd, it's Lazarus the beggar who get's the escort of angels to Abraham's side.

Luke reminds his readers that when the Kingdom of God is inaugurated through the life death and resurrection of Jesus--the covenant community gets expanded. The out-crowd is welcomed in. The highlighter Luke uses for this theme is Abraham and his family.

Luke reinforces this covenant expansion with Jesus' stories. Jesus in Luke's Gospel is a story-teller. This Gospel is full to the brim of parables. Many of these parables are explicitly about the surprise of who is a part of the covenant community--who is in on the Kingdom of God.

Last week we spent time considering three of those stories--three instances of the Lost being Found, and one conspicuous case of the found being lost. The best known of the those stories was the Prodigal Son. In that story the lost son--who turned his back on his Father's love, and wasted his father's wealth on wild living--that terrible and wicked son comes back and his Father runs out to meet him.

The lost is found. But the brother who had stayed. Who didn't waste the father's wealth--grumbled and muttered about his wild brother's reception. The story ends with the good father's invitation to the grumbling brother to come-in and celebrate the bad brother's return.

Jesus' told those stories in response to a specific in-crowd/out-crowd question, that being: What about the Tax Collectors? Can tax collectors be a part of Abraham's family, can they be part of the covenant community.

That was a big question because tax collectors were outside of society. They were not clean, they couldn't participate in synagogue. They used the threat of violence to take more money than was needed. Jewish tax collectors were viewed as traitors to their people. Like informants in totalitarian states, or collaborators in an occupied territory. They were despised

In the chapter preceding our text Jesus' hits on this topic. In chapter 18 Jesus tells a story that Luke introduces by saying: *"To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable."* The parable is a story of a pharisee and a tax collector who go to pray. The Pharisee thanks God that he's more righteous than others, and the tax collector asks God for mercy because he knows he's a sinner.

The people in trouble in Jesus' parables aren't the tax collectors. The prodigal isn't the son that's in trouble. It's the people who think they're righteous. It's the ones who are confident that they know where they're going that are in trouble, they're the ones who are really lost.

When my friends and I were sure that we could find the trail, we were actually further from safety than we admitted that we were lost and stopped in the meadow.

The lost and found and who's part Abraham's family are essential themes for understanding the background for the story of Zaccheus.

Zaccheus' story starts in chapter 19 verse 1, with Jesus entering Jericho. Jericho is one of the oldest continual inhabited cities in the world. It was the first city taken when Israel conquered Canaan. It was a gateway city.

Jesus is entering it after a long travel narrative--the disciples and Jesus started heading towards Jerusalem back in chapter 9, and now they're getting close. The drama is escalating. Jesus' spicy stories about tax collectors and wild-living brothers being further-up and further into the kingdom God--those stories and Jesus' actions were being noticed. There were crowds following Jesus. There were people frustrated with his odd take on who's in and who's out.

Jesus is trending. People are talking about him.

And he entered Jericho and the crowds lined up.

Verse 2 introduces Zaccheus as a chief tax collector, and very wealthy. This means he didn't just take taxes from the people, he took taxes from the people taking taxes. Zaccheus benefited from compound injustice and that made him wealthy and well known. Zaccheus was not a good person. Zaccheus was bad.

But Zaccheus wanted to see Jesus. The language in verse 3 suggests he had wanted to see Jesus for a while.

And it seems that Zaccheus knows he was a sinner.

But what could Zaccheus do? His whole life is built around an unjust system that alienated him from his people--Abraham's family. Those people hated him because of his exploitation of them.

Zaccheus is famous and wealthy and stuck. The way the story unfolds, and where it's placed paints a picture of someone aware of that their way of life is wrong. It's not an over-reach based on the details provided to say that Zaccheus experienced real sorrow for his sins.

Side-note: we talk about consolation and desolation a lot at Grandview. Consolation and desolation are part of a Christian tradition of self-reflection that tries to understand how God is present in our lives, and where God might be leading us. The self-reflection involves meditation about our feelings. One underrated form of consolation is sorrow for sin. That contrition is actually a sign that the Holy Spirit is drawing close. Consolation is about marking the times in our lives when we experience the nearness of God--and the nearness of God brings a deeper awareness of our sin.

And that nearness brings hope of transformation.

Filled with the hope of seeing Jesus, Zaccheus goes to the road. His tiny stature prevents him from seeing Jesus. And he knows no one is going to make room for him. So he runs ahead to a tree and climbs up it.

This is the part of the story that parallels the Prodigal Son's journey back from the wild living--rehearsing his conversation with his father, asking to just be a hired hand on the farm. Zaccheus just wants to see Jesus.

When Jesus gets to the tree in verse 5, it says Jesus looked up. Jesus looked up at the tax collector, the sinner, the man who's whole life had perpetuated injustice and violence against God's covenant people. The good messiah looks up at the bad sinner, and the crowds watch. Their eyes going back and forth between Jesus and Zaccheus.

And Jesus speaks: "Zaccheus hurry up and come down here, I must stay at your house."

I get stuck on this verse every time I come to the story. There are three parts of this verse that punch me in the gut. First--that Jesus knows his name. You feel Zaccheus' yearning for a friend. After being cut off from his people. Despised and looked down on. Here is Jesus, the person who everyone's been talking about for years--and Jesus knows Zaccheus.

Second: the publicness. There's something about big things being in public that heighten emotions. I remember last time I preached, I spoke about my niece. I practiced and practiced. I recorded myself and listened close. No emotions. I was a rock. But as soon as I got in front of you people--the gut started getting tingly and my voice trembled. And here in front of everyone Zaccheus' most deep down yearnings are getting pulled out and seen by the crowd of grumbler.

Third: the immediacy. Zaccheus was stuck. Nothing he could do to get out of that injustice and back into relationship. His sin was ever before him and to quote Ephesians: he was *dead in his transgressions and sins, separated from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel without hope and without God in the world.*

But now in Christ Jesus those who once were far away have been brought near.

It's a sudden shift. Like the relief that comes from throwing-up after a stomach ache. Or, even more akin, when a kid is shaking in uncontrollable tears is lifted up by their mom.

This is Jesus being the Good father in the parable of the Prodigal Son: *"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.*

Suddenly the Lost Zaccheus was found.

The night I was stuck in the woods we regretted our decisions. We shivered and ate all of our food: one box of cheese crackers. And then we waited. There was nothing we could do. We didn't know which way the road was. We couldn't go back the way we came because of the terrain. We were stuck.

And then we heard a helicopter. It flew over, then swung around, between trees and landed in our meadow. The pilot got out and said: "Are you Jake, Pete and Ryan?"

Now I love hearing my name, but I can't think of a time in my life I was happier to hear it. And then we hopped in the helicopter and were taken to a fire station for cinnamon rolls and hot chocolate with our friends and family.

When Zaccheus heard his name he hurried down the tree, and welcomed Jesus gladly. That's when the crowd started grumbling like the older brother. They were frustrated with Jesus. This wasn't the type of messiah they wanted.

And fair enough. Jesus is hanging-out in a house that was paid for with the money stolen from them. Jesus is honoring a man who's whole life was based on the threat of violence and exploiting those who couldn't stand-up to that threat.

Hearing that grumbling, Zaccheus gets up and says to Jesus: *“Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”*

He had cheated. Zaccheus was committing to giving up everything. Zaccheus is doing what the rich young ruler in chapter 18 could not: he’s giving up everything--because Jesus called his name when he was stuck in a tree.

Jesus then puts this story in context--he connects it to his redefinition of who the in-crowd is, who is lost and who is found. Jesus answers Zaccheus (and I think we’re supposed to imagine the grumbling crowd listening in): *“Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”*

Zaccheus the chief tax collector. The bad man. Zaccheus is part of the covenant community, part of Abraham’s family. Zaccheus--the most out of the out-crowd became part of the in-crowd.

That’s some pretty great cinnamon rolls and hot chocolate.

This story is one short parable away from Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. In Jerusalem the people who were grumbling would conspire with the unjust and oppressive system that Zaccheus had benefited from. They would come together to kill Jesus. The story of Zaccheus, a sinner stuck in a tree, is juxtaposed next to the story of Jesus the savior on the cross for those sins: Jesus takes the place of the sinner, of all sinners.

To really understand this story, we need to remember what broke the barrier wall between Zaccheus and the covenant community, what makes impossible reconciliations possible: But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near *by the blood of Christ.*

I don’t fully understand the mechanics of how it works, but I know that Jesus’ death and resurrection was God’s way of seeking and saving the lost.

The past month I’ve been struck by the connections between this story and the parable of the Prodigal son. I’ve been thinking a lot about the older brother, the good son--grumbling about his Father throwing a party for the bad son.

I love parties. Celebrating is important to me. I'm furious that this pandemic screwed up my birthday party. It eats at me that the older brother seems to miss out on the party because he couldn't handle his father's forgiveness.

That grumbling and grudge-holding--that gate-keeping of the in-crowd keeps us out of the party of God. There are relationships that I've given up on because of anger or hurt.

But this story shows us a God who doesn't give up. Who goes in after the lost. If Zaccheus isn't too far gone, than no one is. God is seeking. God is initiating. God is redeeming: reconciling all things to himself through Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the good father who sprints-off after his miserable son.

So we should not give up on those miserable sons. The places where we see no hope, whether their family relationships or oppressive systems--God is at work. Don't give-up.

One of the most famous benedictions has language that echos our story. It echos the theme of God's outreach to sinners--God seeking love. The language in the priestly blessing in Numbers chapter 6 has a sense of God's face shining up. It might be hoky, but as I quote it I'm going to ask you to imagine yourself in a tree of your choosing and Jesus underneath looking up.

*““The Lord bless you
and keep you;
the Lord make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you;
the Lord turn his face toward you
and give you peace.””*