

Wanting Salvation
Proper 26C, Luke 19.1-10
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About 25 years ago, when Ardelle and I were new to the Episcopal Church, we weren't sure whether our two-year-old should receive communion, so we opted for a blessing from the priest. Unfortunately, Alden was a strangely verbal little boy who almost overnight went from mistaking cats for cows to speaking in fully formed paragraphs. I say unfortunately, because in that small church, if the eucharistic minister serves you the wine, announcing that it's "the blood of Christ, the cup of salvation," and then passes by the aforementioned child, everyone in the church will hear when he yells, "I want some salvation. Mama, I want some of that salvation! Why can't I have some salvation?"

We laughed our nonchalant little kids-say-the-darndest-things laughs, which everyone knows are how first-time parents try to mask their horror at the unholy little terror they've brought into the house of God. When we got back to our pew, Alden was still feeling pretty ripped off. So, Ardelle tried to calm him and said, "Well, it's not really salvation. It's ... Well ... I guess it is salvation in a way ... I mean ..." And we left it at that.

Later we asked gentle old Father Ed whether a child should receive communion before he understands what he's doing. And Ed said, "Do you understand it?"

Today I'm putting a question to you, whatever your age. Do you want some salvation? Is that what you came here looking for today, even if you've grown up enough to know you should never say such a thing out loud in polite company? And if salvation is what you want, do you know what salvation is?

The story of Zacchaeus is one of the most memorable in the New Testament. As children we sang, "Zacchaeus was a wee little man, a wee little man was he..." Anybody else remember that one?

But the story ends with Jesus saying, "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." Well, what does it mean that salvation has come to the house of Zacchaeus?

For a lot of Christians, maybe most Christians, to be saved by Jesus means to avoid eternal punishment in hell after you die. But there's nothing in this story to suggest Zacchaeus or Jesus were worried about the destiny of one short tax collector's eternal soul.

What the story says is that Zacchaeus seeks out this Jewish prophet Jesus. And when Jesus pauses and says he'll be staying at Zacchaeus's house that day, the little man jumps down from his perch in the tree and 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." That's what Jesus is responding to directly when he says, "Today salvation has come to this house..."

So one biblical answer to the question "What is salvation?" seems to be generosity to the poor and restitution ... reparations, actually, for any economic injustice we've benefitted from. It seems more faithful, by the light of this story, if your little boy starts announcing to the church that he wants some salvation, to assume he's asking for is for his life to be one of generosity and justice. Alden didn't know that's what he was asking for. But he didn't know it was wine either. And, as

Father Ed pointed out so gently, Ardelle and I didn't know much more about the mystery of communion than our vociferous two year old did.

But let's pull back a bit. It can be dangerous to take a verse or a story out context. Here are the scenes in Luke that lead up to today's gospel. Last week we read from the previous chapter, where we met a Pharisee who was confident of his goodness, which included—please note—giving away a tenth of his income. But he was smug and self righteous about it. Jesus commended to us a humble tax collector. That's right. A tax collector like Zacchaeus. But this one was beating his breast and asking for mercy. Jesus says those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Right after that people bring their children to Jesus. The disciples put them off, but Jesus says, "Let the little children come to me... for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs." Hmm. Maybe we have something to learn from that child begging so noisily for a sip of salvation.

Next a rich young ruler asks what he must do to be saved. He's kept all the commandments. So Jesus tells him to sell everything he has, give it to the poor, and follow him. The man shuffles away, dejected. And Jesus says it's harder for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. For humans it's actually impossible, but not for God. Then Jesus tells his disciples about his coming death and resurrection for the third time and for the third time they have no idea what he's talking about.

From there, they walk on toward Jericho where they meet a blind beggar calling out for mercy. The disciples, true to form, try to shush the blind man. But he yells only louder. Yells like a kid the chalice has passed by. And Jesus says, "Receive your sight; your faith has saved you." And then, Jesus and his friends walk on into Jericho where they meet the little man in the sycamore tree.

Jesus's project seems to be meeting all sorts of people in all sorts of situations and pushing them to enter the kingdom of God where true salvation is found. Doing so might mean being humble about our failings rather than proud about our virtues. It might mean giving the possessions that possess us to the poor. It might mean having the innocent curiosity of a child, or it might look like a blind beggar who won't be shut up, because he has faith that he is worthy of being heard, worthy even to be healed. Or it might look like Zacchaeus, when salvation entered his house in the form of generosity and restitution to anyone he had defrauded.

What's conspicuously absent here, and almost everywhere in the New Testament if we actually read it, is Jesus telling people that he's saving them from the fires of eternal torment. What he's showing us is how to step forward into the kingdom of God, a realm in which the rules are all so utterly different from the kingdoms we build and inhabit. But God's kingdom—which really is eternal, which is the deeper, truer nature of all things—that kingdom can spring into view in all sorts of ways in our lives. Like a mustard seed that grows into a tree or yeast that blows up a measure of flour into a loaf of bread. Salvation means being present to and aware of this kingdom when it breaks into view in this world and in our lives.

But we've been conditioned by the conditional kingdoms of this world, not God's. Kingdoms that make us prove our worth and worthiness. So we assume the generosity of Zacchaeus is what saved him. It's true that the Bible is relentless in saying that if we are not compassionate and generous, demanding justice and mercy for the poor, we are simply lost. We're oblivious to God's presence. But it's not because God isn't present. It's that we've been distracted and consumed by all the wrong things. What Jesus teaches, over and again, is not "Watch out or else you'll go to the bad place when you die!" What he says is that there is a kingdom of God that is within you and right in front of you if you will only learn to orient yourself and your life to it. Which is to orient your life

toward humble sinners and curious children and bold, blind beggars and tax collectors who have decided to be generous and just.

"You say you want some salvation?" Jesus says to each of us. "Well here's what it looked like in the lives of these people. What might it look like in your life?"

After that desperate little boy at the communion rail had grown up and gone off to college, he gave me a new translation of the New Testament for Christmas one year. The translator is a brilliant and quite conservative Greek Orthodox scholar named David Bentley Hart. He was so faithful to the original Greek that he preserved grammatical errors and clumsy syntax. But the two deepest learnings for him as he translated were the radical rejection of possessions by the first Christians and the New Testament's insistence that, in the end, all people and all things will be saved. That's right everyone. And every living thing. All of reality, in the end, will be saved.

I won't take you through Professor Hart's long list of clear, forceful, direct statements of the ultimate salvation of all. But they are everywhere and they echo his translation of 1 John 2:2: "And he is atonement for our sins, and not only for ours, but for the whole cosmos." Or John 3:17 which always seems to get left off of the most famous verse in the Christian Bible: "For God sent the Son into the cosmos not that he might condemn the cosmos, but that the cosmos might be saved through him."

This does not mean there's no place for judgment. David Bentley Hart believes that we will see one day, at the end of the age, how oblivious we have been to God's kingdom. And there is no way for such knowledge to register as anything but judgment on our blindness and self centeredness. But it will be in the context of seeing that our failure was in comprehending the breadth and depth of God's love and mercy. And one way we fail is by centering a few metaphorical images of eternal anguish for sinners, while dismissing the clearly stated biblical hope in, as Dr. Hart puts it, "that final horizon of all horizons... where even those who have traveled as far from God as it is possible to go, through every possible self-imposed hell, will at the last find themselves in the home to which they are called from everlasting, their hearts purged of every last residue of hatred and pride."

Zacchaeus wasn't securing his place in that glorious realm beyond all ages where all things will be restored by his good works. His simple acts of generosity and restitution were how that true and eternal kingdom can still burst into the ordinary, imperfect circumstances of lives like ours right now.

I don't know about you, but I spend too much of my time disheartened and anxious and angry. I feel like I no longer even share the most basic definition of truth, decency, and goodness with so many of my fellow humans, and I don't see signs of things improving. Maybe it's in times like these that I need to remember how horribly wrong the world was in the days of Jesus of Nazareth and Paul of Tarsus and a little tree climbing tax collector named Zacchaeus. And to remember that each of these bore witness to a deeper reality that will ultimately subsume the sinful, broken reality in which they lived.

One day in Jericho, the salvation of the whole cosmos came to the house of a tax collector named Zacchaeus. I ask you, friends, what might it look like if the salvation of the whole cosmos came to your house or my house today?