

“RULE BREAKERS, RESISTANCE, AND ZACCHAEN ECONOMICS”

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Gospel Reading and Sermon Text: Luke 19:1-10

Sermon Theme: Zacchaeus’ story offers a powerful metaphor to frame and deepen our understanding of creative resistance among people of faith who possess some wealth within our society. Zacchaeus surprises the crowds surrounding him by the way he creatively resists the position he holds within the Roman Empire and refuses to be trapped and bound by the stories others tell of him in his own city.

Prayer for Illumination: *Open our ears, our eyes, and our hearts as we read these sacred words, O God. May these words enliven our imaginations and heighten our awareness of your ever present love in our daily lives. Amen.*

19 Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through town. 2 A man there named Zacchaeus, a ruler among tax collectors, was rich. 3 He was trying to see who Jesus was, but, being a short man, he couldn’t because of the crowd. 4 So he ran ahead and climbed up a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus, who was about to pass that way. 5 When Jesus came to that spot, he looked up and said, “Zacchaeus, come down at once. I must stay in your home today.” 6 So Zacchaeus came down at once, happy to welcome Jesus.

7 Everyone who saw this grumbled, saying, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.”

8 Zacchaeus stopped and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord, I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone, I repay them four times as much.”

9 Jesus said to him, “Today, salvation has come to this household because he too is a son of Abraham. 10 The Human One[a] came to seek and save the lost.”

The grass withers and the flower fades but these Holy words may endure forever in our memory and action.

Over the last week I have been following stories in the *New York Times* written by reporter Sarah Maslin Nir on the [“Price of Nice Nails.”](#) I wonder if you also have been reading these reports about salons in Manhattan that advertise a starting wage of \$10 a day. Lawsuits being filed in New York courts allege a long list of abuses: workers being paid just \$1.50 an hour during a 66-hour workweek; people forced to work 24 hour shifts; and, manicurists being

charged for drinking the water and on slow days getting paid nothing at all.¹ The long list of economic injustices is only what is most evident on the surface of the problems when you consider the dynamics of race and ethnicity, physical and verbal abuse, and health issues that manicurists face because of overexposure to toxic chemicals and inadequate ventilation.

I will confess that after a long semester, several late nights of grading papers, campus graduation events, and dealing with student grade complaints, the special retreat of a spa pedicure is something that I truly relish. Do you know what I mean or have you shared this longing? It enables me to relax and puts me in a new state of mind. Zacchaeus' words to Jesus haunt me, "Look, Lord, I give half of my possessions to [people in poverty]. And if I have cheated anyone, I repay them four times as much." Sarah Maslin Nir reminded me of the connection between my freedom to enjoy the luxury of nice nails and the limitations of freedom and abuse experienced by others.

This week, I felt I needed to know how the workers in the salon that I visit a few times a year are treated. So I decided to break what I thought of as a well-known social rule—don't tell others how much money you make and don't ask others about their income—and talk candidly with Lynn, the manicurist I like best and have known for years, about her income and whether or not she is paid fairly. Lynn and I have carried on nice conversations before, but seldom do they reach beyond the level of small talk; that is part of what makes pedicures so luxurious—you can escape from your public role for a few minutes. Honestly, I felt a little nervous about how this might conversation might go.

I climbed up into the massage chair and sank my feet in the warm blue water bath and started to explain that I had been reading the *New York Times* articles on nail salons. Lynn

¹Sarah Maslin Nir, "The Price of Nice Nails," *New York Times* (May 7, 2015). Accessed online at http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/10/nyregion/at-nail-salons-in-nyc-manicurists-are-underpaid-and-unprotected.html?_r=0.

responded quickly, “I know. Can you believe what they charge for manicures? The prices are way too cheap, especially when New York is so expensive.” She had been reading the *New York Times* series too.

Since she had been reading the series, I quickly cut to the chase and asked her: “So, how much do you make here?”

Lynn didn’t appear to be uncomfortable with my question and responded with ease, “We work by commission.”

“So you don’t have an hourly wage?,” I inquired.

“No. We are self-employed,” Lynn said. “We get paid a set amount for every manicure or pedicure that we do.”

“Do you get health insurance?”

“No. We have to pay that out of our commission.” She explained that she didn’t think she was exploited in the same way as the women described in the *New York Times* articles but she could see how it could happen.

I never could get her to answer questions about just how much her commission was on each set of nails that she does. I think it may have been the way I was asking that question though. After I returned home, I did some searching online and found that a person working as a manicurist can expect to earn about \$9 per hour or a little over \$19,000 per year in Kentucky, well below the living wage of \$17 per hour in Louisville. Lynn has two children and supports her parents who live with her.

I should also say that Lynn is only the name she uses at the salon. I was aware from previous conversations with her that she immigrated more than twenty years ago to the United States as a refugee from South Vietnam. What I had not heard before was that she sends money

back to her sister who remained in Vietnam because she was married and unable to attain refugee status with the rest of her family. I also did not know that her first job was arranged by the refugee ministry that brought her to Louisville. [Her first job was working at the slaughterhouse in the Butchertown area as a sweeper cleaning up the floor.](#) To do that job she had to don a special protective suit, heavy gloves, and steel toed boots.

“I hated that job,” she told me, “it was so stinky. When I came to this shop it was like a breath of fresh air.” Keep in mind, that another manicurist was spray painting a woman’s nails nearby during our conversation and the room was filled with an odor that reminded me of freshly opened Sharpie markers.

I interrupted Lynn, “How much did you get paid as a sweeper?”

“\$6.25 an hour. This job is much better,” she said.

Our conversation quickly turned back to small talk when the noise level rose in the room as someone turned the channel on the TV to “Let’s Make a Deal.”

Zacchaeus’ words to Jesus, “Look, Lord, I give half of my possessions to [people in poverty]. And if I have cheated anyone, I repay them four times as much,” have confronted me with the blunt force of my own integrity as I reflected on my conversation with Lynn. What surprised me most was the ease of our conversation about pay. I realized that the social rule I was breaking not to talk about my own income or to ask anyone about theirs is a rule created to protect me, the wealthy. It didn’t take long to see and hear the ugliness scratching just beneath the surface of beauty industry.

From where I sit, the growing wealth divide in the U.S. and between the U.S. and other nations around the world is the most significant theological and moral problem of our time. Much attention has been given in recent years to the growing wealth divide and how it is

evidenced in the differences of experiences found between those sitting in the massage chair or the manicurist's seat, standing in the CEO's office or the mail clerk's post, creating the Supervisor's strategy or the technician's plan, or among those readings applications with the convicted felons box checked or the unemployed person with a criminal record. Zacchaeus' story offers a powerful metaphor to frame and deepen our understanding of creative resistance among people of faith who possess some wealth within our society. Zacchaeus surprises the crowds surrounding him by the way he creatively resists the position he holds within the Roman Empire and refuses to be trapped and bound by the stories others tell of him in his own city.

Zacchaeus was a rule breaker, you see. Zacchaeus was a tax collector, but not the average kind; he was "the ruler of tax collectors" in Jericho, a place where Jesus was passing through on his way to Jerusalem. Considering the symbolism of Jericho is worthwhile as we think about the importance of the story of Jesus' and Zacchaeus' meeting. In the Hebrew bible, Jericho was the most important city in the Jordan Valley and the strongest fortress in the land of Canaan. The city was overtaken in a remarkable way by the Israelites. Once accursed where all the inhabitants and the city were destroyed, only the silver and the gold, and the vessels of brass and iron were reserved and placed into the house of the Holy One for sharing (see Joshua 6:24). The city stood in a different place when the gospel of Luke was written, but the symbolism maintains relevance for Zacchaeus' story.

Average tax collectors played a key role in maintaining the bureaucracy of the Roman Empire, but chief tax collectors, like Zacchaeus, held an even more elite status. The Romans believed in localized government except for in the case of high judicial authorities and the army. Often the landowners within particular regions were given positions of authority and would then serve as tax collectors with the duty of gathering resources to bolster the Empire. Zacchaeus had

the responsibility of collecting taxes on behalf of imperial authorities and could keep some of the proceeds for himself.

In ancient Rome, taxes were levied at harvest time. Wealth at that time wasn't created through stocks, bonds, or trade, but was gained by land turned by labor into food, which, in the case of the rich, was turned into sufficient money easily converted into privilege and power. In rural areas, impoverished farmers worked land owned by the rich. Historian Peter Brown estimates that "60 percent of the wealth of the Roman empire was gathered at harvest time by a labor force that amounted to over 80 percent of the population."² Both the wealthy and those who were poor depended upon the harvest; a harvest that was vulnerable to the unpredictable changes in weather conditions. Only a small portion of each harvest stayed with laborers. Later, after taxes were collected, the collectors returned to the laborers to ask for the rent due to them on their land. Very little of the harvest was left to the farmers. The vulnerability of crops to disease and bad weather made life circumstances particularly volatile for farmers. Wealthy landowners could build granaries to protect themselves and their families during times of famine. Granaries protected by heavy locked gates stood tall as symbols of economic exploitation in the context of ancient Rome.

These historical details offer fresh insight into Jesus's parable about the rich fool where he tells the story of the land of a rich man producing abundantly. The landowner asks himself what he should do when he has no more places to store his crops. "I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." But God's response, as told by Jesus in the parable, is this: "You fool!" This very night

² Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012, 11.

your life is being demanded of you ... those who store up treasures for themselves ... are not rich toward God” (Luke 12:16-21).

Many Jewish people regarded tax collectors as traitors to their laws. No wonder the crowds grumble in the story when Jesus insists on visiting Zacchaeus in his house. To the crowds, this man was “small in stature.” In other words, he sank to the lowest of the low in social standing by being willing to enforce the oppressive and exploitative policies of the Roman Empire. However, there is also a disruptive undercurrent throughout this story. Zacchaeus holds a position of social honor within the Empire, yet at the same time is marginalized. None other than the chief tax collector wants to try to see Jesus. He breaks social rules, like a child, climbs a tree so that he can look above the crowds and catch a glimpse of Jesus as he enters the city. Jesus also shows himself to be a rule breaker in the story, breaking social boundaries and resisting the approval of the crowds. Surprisingly, he insists on going to the tax collector’s house to stay. There Zacchaeus, , reveals what he intends to do: “half of my possessions Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything I will pay him back four times as much” (Luke 19:8). He is not only willing to renounce his own wealth and status to do justice in his community, but Zacchaeus also makes a decision that does not seem to be in his own self-interest. Zacchaeus refuses to be trapped into and held in bondage by the position or narrative created for him by the Romans or other residents of Jericho. He has a larger social imagination as he steps into a difficult place, a creative space, where he experiences tension with the crowds and works to eliminate the social distance that the Empire has placed between him and those most vulnerable in his ancient society. Now you know why Zacchaeus, in Greek, literally means clean or innocent. He came clean and salvation came to him and his house!

One of the most intriguing aspects of this story for someone like me, a person of relative wealth when compared to vast majority of the world's people, is that Zacchaeus is one of the few stories that offers a perspective relevant for contemporary middle class readers from the ancient biblical text. Zacchaeus' story can help middle class people to help us make sense of own role in today's story of wealth inequalities and social division. There are few examples of wealthy people acting justly in the gospel stories. Most of them are written from the perspective of and to people who lived in poverty. That made sense in a society in which 90-95% of people lived in poverty. But Zacchaeus' story invites us to look through a different lens as he disrupts the narrative, social divisions, and interrupts the stereotypes even tax collectors. Can you think of any more recent examples of people who have practiced Zacchaen economics, given of their possessions and themselves, made decisions that were not necessarily in their own self-interest? A few examples come to my mind.

You may have heard about Dorothy Day a Roman Catholic lay leader who along with her friend Peter Maurin co-founded the Catholic Worker movement during the Great Depression. One of the three prongs of their program of action in response to the wealth inequalities, hunger, and homelessness of that time was to create houses of hospitality directly in response to need. Dorothy Day read the writings of early church thinkers and was challenged to open her home, an apartment she shared with her brother John and his wife Tessa, to welcome homeless people simply because there was need. In a sense, she took a vow of poverty. But let me explain that she did not renounce her possessions because she had an overly romantic view of poverty; she shared her possessions to eliminate social distance and recognize the common humanity of all people.

Another example that may be closer to the experience of Presbyterians is the story of Charles Grawemeyer. Grawemeyer was a Presbyterian and an entrepreneur in Louisville, my home town. His first business was buying chickens and selling their eggs to neighbors. He later became very successful as the Chairperson of an international coatings company. He was also well-known for asking penetrating questions about the workings of the world. Before he died, he looked at the fortune that he made and then at the needs of his own family and determined exactly how much they needed to live a comfortable life. Then he gave the rest of his fortune away.

Vevely Malloy started a day care center called Children's World in Laurinburg, North Carolina in her home more than twenty years ago. Vevely is trained as a teacher and when her husband became district superintendent for the Methodist Church she decided to maintain her house in Laurinburg and the day care center they built there even though they had to move to Fayetteville, a larger city about an hour and a half away. She could have easily retired but instead of enjoying leisure she recognized the important educational training they were providing and service for families working in primarily hourly wage jobs. Many of the major employers like textile industries and furniture companies have moved out of the area. Lower paying hourly wage jobs are not just about all that are available in the area. One of the most unique things about the center is that Vevely breaks some of the usual day care rules. Doors are open for sick children; she makes a space in the home where they can remain separated from healthy kids. Kids can stay late without a lot of added fees. Vevely understands the need and if parents can't afford to pay finds other ways for trade or offer their labor.

Some dear friends of ours, Kerry Rice and Cindy Cushman have embodied Zacchaen economics in their family life. After having two of their own biological children they decided to

become foster parents. The first foster children that they cared for were twins, Josh and Isaiah, who as infants both had some significant medical issues. After caring for the children for some time they decided to adopt them and soon they learned that they also had siblings. So they appealed to adopt the twins' siblings. Their family ultimately grew to eight after they adopted four children. I wrote to Kerry and Cindy via e-mail and asked them both why they decided to take the financial and emotional risks to become foster children and then ultimately adopt them. Kerry wrote, "Part of my motivation was that we realized what a privilege it was to have and raise children, and that not everyone is able to do so (due to finances, social injustices, disabilities, mental illness, etc.) ... part of our responsibility is to raise children who weren't able to be cared for. Felt like it was part of the commitment we make when a child is baptized ... Not only were we surprised by some of the challenges, but also by some of the gifts." Cindy and Kerry could have decided to do things differently. Cindy observed, "there's no question our lives would be financially easier if we only had 2 kids and not 6, and the girls know that had we not adopted four other kids they would have more 'stuff' than they do now, but they don't resent that I don't think. Like Kerry said, they are of an age now that they appreciate who they are now and how having this different kind of family has shaped them."

I wonder who comes to your mind. Aren't we all looking for some glimpse of Jesus in our own world? Aren't we all hoping that we can come closer to God's larger social imagination for our world spoken clearly by the prophets and captured in the practice of Zacchaeus? Moving beyond small talk and deepening our conversation about wealth inequalities, connections to race and ethnicity, our own personal responsibility and reconsidering the relationship of our own self-interest to a larger common good is never easy. I won't pretend today to have all the answers. Rather I will leave you with the challenging questions that Zacchaeus' brings to us: Where are

the trees that we need to climb or chairs we need to sit to gain a better view of the injustices we are facing or that we create? What can we do personally and as a community to respond to directly to needs that we see all around us and create change?

I mentioned Charles Grawemeyer and how he responded to questions like these. He determined how much he needed to live and gave the rest away. What I didn't tell you was he was the child of German immigrants born in Louisville. It makes me wonder about Lynn's children and the children of her sister in Vietnam that she supports. What she is doing now is changing generations in two places and who knows what the impact will be. My friends Vevely and Cindy and Kerry answered these questions by caring for at risk children and remembering the baptismal covenant that each and every child is a child of God. Dorothy Day renounced her status and material wealth to experience and identify with lived reality of all people. There is not one way to embrace what I like to call Zacchaen economics, but I am sure that like Zacchaeus, Charles, Vevely, Lynn, Cindy, Kerry, and Dorothy each broke social norms, rules, and expectations. They refused to be bound or trapped by what way things have always been and opened up new spaces of grace....spaces that are a little more just, a little more loving, a little more generous. None of that, in my mind, is small in stature. Maybe you and I too can welcome Christ into our home today. Amen.