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“Righteousness, Mercy & Everything in Between”

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Scripture Luke 19:1-10

Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Author, speaker and theologian Rachel Held Evans once said “God has a really bad habit of using people we don’t approve of. What makes the gospel offensive is not who it keeps out, but who it lets in.”

Let me say that again. What makes the gospel offensive is not who it keeps out, but who it lets in. It’s not hard for us to feel in our bodies the “us vs. them” mentality that dominates our national and even international rhetoric. We are constantly dividing ourselves. Constantly judging each other. Constantly putting each other into boxes. Constantly certain that this or that person isn’t redeemable, will never change.

True confessions: I do this as much as the next person. I tell someone else’s story as if the ending is determined. And most of the time, I feel pretty self-righteous about it, certain that I am in the right and they are in the wrong. Certain that mercy must be deserved. After all, aren’t boundaries and accountability central to healthy relationship and thriving community?

But the stories we keep reading about God’s realm, about Christ’s love, keep crossing the boundaries I want to create. It’s not that they don’t hold people accountable. It’s not that they don’t address harm doing head on. It’s not that anything goes. It’s that “God has a really bad habit of using people we don’t approve of. [That] What makes the gospel offensive is not who it keeps out, but who it lets in.”

Take this morning’s story about Zaccheus. In many ways it could have been lifted straight out of Father Gregory Boyle’s book “Cherished Belonging.” There might be less swearing and fewer tattoos. Zaccheus is a government worker as opposed to a recently-released-from-prison former gang member. But the harm Zaccheus has done to his neighbors is no less real -- he has profited off of his neighbor’s righteousness, he has gotten himself wildly wealthy off of their discipline and labor. Like the men and women in Father’s Gregory’s stories, Zaccheus is frankly guilty of much sin. He’s caused much harm. He is perhaps rightfully a social pariah.

But, just as with each and every person who walks through the doors of Homeboy Industries, there’s a longing in Zaccheus’s heart. Perhaps he can’t even articulate what the longing is about except that he wants to see this guy Jesus. But that longing moves Zaccheus. He takes a risk, goes out on a limb. And not only does he see Jesus, but Jesus sees him.

And Jesus sees Zaccheus with God’s eyes. Jesus sees beyond the harm that Zaccheus has done. Jesus sees someone hungry for connection. Someone in need of mercy. Jesus sees Zaccheus through the lens of love. So he invites himself over for dinner. After all, more often than not, the needful thing is not showing someone how they are wrong, but instead showing them how they are loved, how they belong.

Being seen through a lens of love is transformational. It certainly transforms Zaccheus. It transforms his vision. All of a sudden Zaccheus sees through the lens of love. He sees the harm he has done AND the hope of making things right. AND what righteousness looks like -- HOW to be in right relationship with his neighbors.

It's hard to do, though, isn't it: to see through the lens of love? Our own history can get in the way. The ways we've been hurt in the past. Trust that's been broken. Uncertainty in the present. Fear. Harm that's actively being done.

Writer and theologian, Debie Thomas confesses: "I know that even now, I hold people hostage to versions of themselves they're striving to outgrow. I know that I refuse people the permission to change, because if they change, I will have to change, too."

She continues: "Likewise, I know that there are areas in my life where God is asking me to stand my ground and tell a new story about myself — a story my listeners might have high stakes in resisting. These are the places where I am tempted to retreat, to quit, to resort to a vision of humanity that is ordinary and mortal, not extraordinary and lasting." These are the places where we are tempted to see through our eyes and not God's, to see through lenses of fear instead of lenses of love.

In this moment in history, today, "How is our faith calling us to embrace with humility the people we have deliberately refused to see as God sees them? How is our faith propelling us to rediscover our own selves: mind, body, and soul in fresh ways?" Seeing as God sees, seeing ourselves and others through a lens of love and mercy is a dangerous thing. It leads Zechariah to giving away half of his wealth to the poor. Paying back four times over every person he's cheated. No doubt there will be some grumbling in his household about this radical change. No doubt, sacrifices will be made.

Seeing through the lens of love is risky business, but it is also the thing that will set us free -- the thing that will heal and make us whole. It is the antidote to the division, the vitriol, the fear, and the hatred that divides us across our country today. Seeing as God does, seeing through the lens of love will transform not only us but our households, our communities, our country, our world.

"All of us await some permission to imagine things looking different," Father Greg Boyle writes. bell hooks puts it this way: "without an ethic of love shaping the direction of our political visions and our radical aspirations, we are often seduced, in one way or another, into continued allegiance to systems of domination -- imperialism, sexism, racism, classism." But the ethic of love, the lens of love, gives us the imagination to envision something different. And then the courage to show up for it. To march for it. Write letters. Make phone calls. Get curious. Ask questions. Stick together. Commit to community. Show up with tender, loving mercy.

"Then Jesus said, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For I have come to seek and to save the lost.'" When salvation comes, it comes abundantly. It comes without condition or exception. It comes for Zaccheus, who is already trying to shed his sinful life and make reparations to those whom he has wronged. It comes for the crowds, as they dare to shed their preconceptions and stereotypes, and see Zaccheus as a man in process, a man in whom God is at work. It comes because what Jesus sees in every person he encounters is so much richer, deeper, and fuller than our stingy eyes will ever take in apart from him. [Christ shows us what we can scarcely believe: that before I am anything -- before you are anything -- anyone, *anyone's* — we are God's. Let us dare to see through Christ's lens of love trusting that God will transform us and the world with mercy and righteousness and everything in between.