

Making Amends

Luke 19:1-10

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Luke 19:1-10 He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When 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.” So, he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” Zacchaeus 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.” Then Jesus said to him, “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.”

This summer we have been considering the Biblical concept of Justice and our role in bringing God’s Justice into this world – that is, how to ensure that those who are least powerful and least privileged get an equal stake in the benefits that God gives us for the good of all. Last week the lesson was about praying for Justice, if there is nothing else we can do. Today our scripture is about those times when we ourselves are the cause of an injustice, large or small, and we are the only ones who have the power to restore justice to those we have harmed.

So, I read a book this week about how to apologize. It was written by a woman whose father had abused her terribly from the time she was five until she finally ran away from home as a teenager. As you can imagine, it took years and years of therapy for her to come to the point that she was ready to confront him directly and ask for an apology. But by then, he had died. And so, she wrote the apology for him. She put into his voice the words that she needed to hear him say. This book is raw and explicit and painful to read, reflecting the abuse she had suffered, and it painted a very clear picture of the type of apology that can transform and eventually heal a broken relationship, freeing both people from the past.

The author said she needed her father to face squarely what he had done to her, to name it in detail. It was not enough for him to say, “I’m sorry I hurt you,” or worse, “I’m sorry IF I hurt you.” She wanted to know that he knew exactly HOW he had hurt her. Name it. Name every instance. Pain can’t be released until it is recognized and acknowledged.

She also needed her father to face how deeply his actions had devastated her, and how long that damage had lasted in her life. Her pain hadn’t stopped when his anger dissipated. She needed to hear, “I see how my actions caused you to withdraw from your friends and fail in school. I caused that. I see that you are still in therapy, and I know I did that to you.”

She needed her father to see her as a human being, not just as an extension of his own feelings at the moment. She needed him to try – at least try – to experience what it felt like to be on her side of

their relationship. She needed him to feel and to express profound remorse and regret for what he had done. And finally, she needed him to accept responsibility for his actions, owning both what he had done and why. This apology, this full, difficult, painful apology is the only thing that could free both of them from the injustice he had done to her. It is the only thing that could transform their lives and their relationship. It is the only way he could possibly make amends for the damage he had done.

And this brings us to Zaccheus. I learned this Bible story as a child, along with a song. "Zaccheus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he." Did you learn it, too? As I learned this story back then, the whole point was that Jesus notices and accepts literally "the least of these," those who are too small to be noticed by anyone else, those whose sins make them unacceptable in polite society. In this way of understanding this story, it is no different from any of the times that Jesus chooses to notice and accept and dine with those who are unacceptable in society.

But that understanding leaves out the last part of the story: Zacchaeus says 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." He knows, of course, that he has defrauded people. He wouldn't mention it otherwise. In the presence of the Living God, he recognizes how he has hurt others, how he has caused injustice. He acknowledges it. He names the damage he has done to them, and he determines to make amends, repaying not only what he took, but four times as much.

It is this act of making amends, not only naming what he has done wrong and the damage it has caused, but owning it and doing everything he can to undo the damage, that frees Zacchaeus from his past, from the sin and guilt that is weighing down his soul. Truly making amends for the harm he has caused to others transforms his life, and possibly theirs as well. Only when Zacchaeus is ready to do this does Jesus say, "Today salvation has come to this house."

Twelve Step programs are about this very process.

Step 4: Make a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

Step 5. Admit to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

Step 6. Be entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

Step 7. Humbly ask God to remove our shortcomings.

Step 8. Make a list of all persons we have harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

Step 9. Make direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

Step 10. Continue to take personal inventory and when we are wrong promptly admit it.

No one gets through life without hurting others, in big ways or small. Those wrongs can hang around inside us and poison our relationships and our own spirits. So, we are all called to make amends when we have caused pain or injustice. Let us do it with courage, for therein we face ourselves and God, and there we find our salvation.

Amen