

Advent Lutheran Church
Beginning Today
April 6, 2025
Luke 19:1-10

April has arrived. And, it always begins with a light hearted holiday: April Fool's Day. A day many of us appreciated more than usual this year.

And, now we are getting ready for another holiday that comes later this month. Go ahead. Say it out loud. We are waiting for _____.

No, not Easter – that will come in due season. First comes Tax Day. That's right. One of those special days that many people talk about but few celebrate.

Our Gospel reading about a tax collector is timely. Taxes are on everyone's mind. And, to be honest, they are especially on mine. In my family I'm the one who gathers the records and files our return. I tend to do so as soon as I've received all of the necessary documents. And, this year was no different.

I filed my tax return and noted when my refund would appear in my bank account. Only the money never arrived. Not on the scheduled day or the next day or the next or the . . . well you get the point.

So I began to investigate. Earlier this week I spent a significant amount of time on the phone with the IRS. While the first person I spoke to was able to confirm they had received my return, she was unable to offer any further insight.

And then I met Alexander. He was the chief tax collector – at least as far as I was concerned – because he had the authority to look into my case. He told me he could help.

After placing me on an extended hold, Alexander returned to explain that my tax return had been flagged and was on hold. It has been referred to the Frivolous Returns Team.

There is nothing I can do to receive the large sum of money I'm due. This team – a group I'd never heard of until a few days ago – has 180 days to review my return. They alone will determine what happens next.

There is nothing I can do. I am powerless.

To be honest, I'm more frustrated with the IRS right now than I ever have been. And, this is despite me trusting that historically they have treated taxpayers fairly.

I don't know Alexander, but I respect his authority. I don't know the unnamed folks on the Frivolous Returns Team, but I am subject to their decision making.

Things were different in the first century. No one trusted the RTS – the Roman Tax System. And it was a system. A corrupt system. A system that extracted the maximum amount possible from as many people as possible.

Instead of people paying a fixed percentage of their income, they were subject to whatever the tax collector could extract from them. And, tax collectors were responsible for a geographic area – meaning folks knew their tax guy. Furthermore, all parties understood that the tax man had quotas and whatever he collected above and beyond that he was keeping for himself.

There was nothing worse than a tax collector except a chief tax collector. Zaccheaus was a chief tax collector – the only one mentioned in all of Scripture.

If people knew the tax collector, then you better believe they knew the chief tax collector. If people hated the tax man, imagine the feelings they had toward the chief tax collector.

He was rich. Filthy rich. He was the last person anyone wanted to see much less interact with.

Today, he's out and about in public. And, he's behaving in ways that have everyone scratching their heads. In fact, they can't

believe it. In their culture and in ours we simply never see the very wealthy behaving in this manner. Rich and powerful men don't climb trees – sycamore or otherwise – to get a better view, instead they push others aside or use their resources to secure private viewing options.

Except that Zacchaeus isn't out to meet societal expectations. This encounter is different. He chooses to behave in an undignified manner by scurrying up a sycamore tree. He's on a mission and won't be deterred.

This story is only found in Luke's Gospel. And, we know Luke relied heavily on Mark for source material. Notably, Mark used the word "today" only once in his entire Gospel. Luke, however, uses the word eleven times – "often emphatically".¹

Some examples: announcing Jesus' birth (2:11), claiming the fulfillment of prophecy in his first ever sermon (4:22), and promising the thief hanging on the cross beside him that he'll be in paradise (23:43).²

The word "today" plays a significant role in this passage, and it's a deliberate choice. Jesus uses it not once, but twice. "Today" highlights urgency, underscoring that the time is now.

Rather than questioning Zacchaeus about his livelihood or his foolish tree climbing, Jesus commands him to come down from the tree immediately and then invites himself over for dinner. Jesus tells Zaccheus he will be coming over to his house today.

Today. Jesus has just invited himself to Zacchaeus' house today.

And rather than be offended at this backwards behavior, Zacchaeus is receptive. He comes down from the tree and readies to host Jesus.

As the crowds grow angry that Jesus is once again about to eat with sinners, Zacchaeus is transformed. He pledges to give half of

¹ R. Alan Culpepper, "Luke," in *New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 9:359-360.

² *Ibid.*

his possessions to the poor and to repay anyone he's cheated four times what he took.

Zacchaeus understood the spiritual practice of stewardship. Rather than repay what he had taken, he promises to do much more. This action means he's effectively resigned from his job.

Jesus affirms his behavior. He pronounces that salvation has arrived today. Zacchaeus has been transformed.

In this story and throughout the Gospels, Jesus wants us to know that his love extends to all people. When society marginalizes entire groups of people, Jesus seeks them out.

Whoever you are and wherever you are on your journey of faith, today Jesus is calling you. He's inviting you to come down. Come down from your tree. Jesus is waiting and he's planning to invite himself not only over to your house for a meal but into your life.

As you encounter Jesus – as you really get to know Jesus – your life will be transformed. It's a holistic transformation that touches every part of who you are and how you live.

And, it is something that calls for a response – today.

Today our congregation begins thinking about this topic as we launch a monthlong campaign, "Growing for the Future."

Our Stewardship Team chose the theme for this campaign, recognizing that we are all called to plant seeds today, trusting they will blossom into something beautiful in the future. In making this commitment, we also acknowledge a simple truth: if nothing is planted, nothing will grow.

Our Growing for the Future campaign includes a call to action – an invitation to make a financial commitment in the form of a pledge for the coming fiscal year. This pledge of our treasure is one we will add to our earlier pledges of time and talent.

That day is coming soon. Stewardship Sunday will be on May 4.

I need you to know that Growing for the Future is much more than a campaign for next fiscal year; it's a way of life. And, it is something we can all start today.

Amen.