

“God’s Gracious Space”

Luke 19:1-10

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Prayer for Understanding Loving God, helps us experience your goodness, joy and grace. Speak to us through these ancient words. Let us get a peek of Your love that knows no limits. Amen

God’s grace is spacious. How do we build authentic relationships with those we adamantly disagree with? Jesus models having a meal with them and treating them with mercy and grace. Mercy begets mercy. Grace generates grace. The crowds grumble at Jesus’ self-invitation to stay with Zacchaeus, and their righteous indignation is not without cause. Zacchaeus extorted money and acted in collusion with the Roman empire, using his position to oppress his own people. It is important to call out oppression, and yet, Jesus offers mercy. That mercy then begets more mercy as Zacchaeus, unprompted, offers to return what he took, and then some.

A reading from the gospel of Luke: **Luke 19:1-10 NLT “Jesus entered Jericho and made his way through the town. Zacchaeus was the chief tax collector in the region, and he had become very rich. Zacchaeus tried to get a look at Jesus, but he was too short to see over the crowd. So Zacchaeus ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree beside the road, for Jesus was going to pass that way. When Jesus came by, Jesus looked up at Zacchaeus and called him by name. “Zacchaeus!” Jesus said. “Quick, come down! I must be a guest in your home today.” Zacchaeus quickly climbed down and took Jesus to his house in great excitement and joy. But the people were displeased. “Jesus has gone to be the guest of a notorious sinner,” they grumbled. Meanwhile, Zacchaeus stood before the Lord and said, “I will give half my wealth to the poor, Lord, and if I have cheated people on their taxes, I will give them back four times as much!” Jesus responded, “Salvation has come to this home today, for this man has shown himself to be a true child of Abraham and Sarah. For I came to seek and save those who are lost.”**

Rachel Held Evans said: “What makes the gospel offensive is who the gospels let’s in.” God’s mercy is infinite. God’s grace is spacious. God loves everyone. God is drawing everyone home to heaven.

Jesus’ followers celebrated God’s mercy and grace, until Zacchaeus. Healing people of diseases, awesome. Giving aid to the poor, fantastic. Welcoming outcasts and people from other cultures and religions, wonderful. Treating women, children, soldiers, slaves, strangers, foreigners as equals, marvelous. Having lunch with a rich person who made his money through a greedy political system, boo, grumblings and protests.

We do not know much about Zacchaeus. Scripture states, “Zacchaeus was very rich and the chief tax collector.” Zacchaeus could have been a deplorable scoundrel skimming extra taxes. Or Zacchaeus could have been honestly enforcing the tax code as legislated by the Roman empire becoming wealthy through the system of that day; so while he might not have been doing anything illegal, he was a part of a political system that was greedy, sought to control and oppress people.

After spending time with Jesus, Zacchaeus becomes aware of oppression, repents and changes, stating, “I will give half my wealth to the poor. If I have cheated people on their taxes, I will give them back four times as much.”

Imagine Jesus is walking in human flesh today in the United States. You are following Jesus. Jesus is healing everyone, welcoming outcasts into community, providing food, health care, and housing to those in need and providing good employment. Do these acts of mercy and grace fill you with joy? Jesus has dinner with a person from the political party that you do not support. How do you feel? Jesus has dinner with a rich person. How do you feel? Jesus has dinner with a greedy politician who makes their money by passing laws that take from the poor to build wealth for themselves. How do you feel?

Most people today have family and friends who support a different political party. Some people have broken off the relationship and many have limited their connection with them. Is there someone you have been avoiding? Jesus models going for a walk with them, having a meal with them. Do not argue, judge, or try to change them. Strive to connect with them. Agree on some ground rules in advance. Maybe no political discussion. Or since political discussion is helpful to understand the myriad of perspectives, maybe some political discussion in the middle of your time together. Agree to begin and end with conversation that draws you together. Agree to use “I” statements. When it comes to politics, “I hope...” and “I am concerned...”. Agree on a safe word in advance that either person can say that instantly stops political discussion. Jesus encourages us to go for a walk or to share a meal with those we disagree with, those with whom we are displeased, those with whom we protest.

Jesus says to Zacchaeus: “Quick, come down! I must be a guest in your home today.” Jesus does not teach, debate, advise, critique, judge, blame or shame Zacchaeus. Jesus simply wants to spend time with Zacchaeus, to

connect with Zacchaeus, to love Zacchaeus, to assure Zacchaeus that the good news of the gospel is for him, that the mercy, grace and eternal home of love is for all people, including the rich who work in a corrupt, oppressive government. Jesus encourages us to move beyond, who we perceive as good? beyond who is righteous? to how will I be merciful and gracious to everyone.

“Righteousness & Mercy”

a poem by Sarah Speed

As children we were taught to tell the teacher.
(Justice was dealt when we spoke up.)
As children we were taught to always be kind.
(Friends were made when we spoke love.)
As children we were taught that Zacchaeus climbed a tree.
(But we cut that tree down a long time ago.)
So what are the rules for this day and age?
Can we turn black and white into shades of gray?
Do we call each other out, for righteousness sake?
Do we call each other in? Do we grab something to eat?
As always, love is somewhere in-between.

One facet of this scripture urges us to build authentic relationships with those we adamantly disagree with. Another facet urges us to be self-aware, spend time with God and change.

Zacchaeus was missing something. Zacchaeus had power, wealth, and luxuries. And he still felt a void. He heard the accounts of Jesus, how Jesus made everyone whole, complete, peaceful, loving, and joyful. Zacchaeus’ self-awareness of his longing propelled him to run, to climb a tree, and to try to get a glimpse of Jesus.

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote: “The recognition that something is wrong is the first step toward setting it right again. There is no help for those who admit no need of help. There is no repair for those who insist that nothing is broken.”

Rabbi David Wolpe writes: “The insensitive person feels less pain himself and inflicts more pain on others. Remorse is not a waste, but an acknowledgment of another’s feelings and fragility. We should not morbidly dwell on our faults. Equally however, an inability to admit what one has done to hurt another, is a spiritual sickness.”

Only God perfectly loves everyone all the time. We are invited to be self-aware of the ways we fail to receive love and fail to share love. After sharing a meal with Jesus, Zacchaeus became aware of his lack of sharing his abundant wealth. Zacchaeus realized his growing edge was to love the oppressed, love the poor, love the outcast, by sharing his wealth with them. Zacchaeus promised, I will give half my wealth to the poor.

Spending time with God enhances our self-awareness, grows our love and expands goodness. For many there is a transformational in between space between naming one’s lack of love and celebrating one’s infinite value as a beloved child of God. For many, repentance is a rhythm of identifying how one is not like Jesus and striving to be like Jesus.

There are blessings in the in-between spaces. The common ground with family and friends in-between different political parties. The abundant life of being aware of one’s shortcomings in-between celebrating one’s giftedness.

Pastor Anna Strickland wrote: “So much of the beauty of the world comes from the in-between spaces. In the space between night and day, the sun and atmosphere collide into a dazzling display of color. Waterfalls span the space between cliffs and the river below with astonishing power. Mangrove forests, beaches, and bayous exist entirely in the space between land and water. The edges of things, the mixing spaces, the spaces where biomes collide, are the most interesting places on earth. And yet, we feel the compulsion to exist in categories. We construct boxes around ‘sacred’ and ‘secular,’ ‘woman’ and ‘man,’ ‘left’ and ‘right,’ compressing the complexity and beauty of the whole spectrum of being into just two words. What a gift it is to set the boxes aside and follow the example of our Creator who created night and day and everything in-between; land and water and everything in-between; you and me and everything in between. The Alpha and the Omega is surely with us in the space in-between.”

God’s grace is spacious. Giving space for people who disagree to enjoy a walk together, a meal together, to authentically connect with each other, to expand each person’s view of the most excellent way of love. God’s grace is spacious. Giving space for us to see our imperfection and see how we are becoming a glorious, perfected community. God grace is spacious. Amen.