

Proper 19 (24) - September 14, 2025

Isaiah 43:1–3a, 5–7; Psalm 36:5–10; Titus 2:11–14; Luke 19:1–10

“Dinner guests”

1. In every interesting story, there always seems to be the need for tension in the plot, and then for that tension to find a satisfying resolution at the end.
 - a. There is a conflict, or a journey the main character has to travel
 - b. Often the tension comes from the interaction of a “good” main character and a “bad” main character
 - i. We can think of heroes/heroines and villains in movies or books
 - ii. Princess Anna and Prince Hans in Frozen
 - iii. Harry Potter and he-who-shall-not-be-named
 - iv. Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader in Star Wars (and that one is complicated too!)
 - c. In American movies, it seems like we like drama best when the good character succeeds and lives happily ever after.
 - i. A romantic comedy seems to want a happy ending
 - d. In European movies and drama, however, there is more willingness to have an unclear ending, leaving the viewer wondering about who “won,” or it may be that the movie is a tragedy, where the end points to unresolved grief.
 - i. Maybe the movie ends and you’re not sure if they got the right criminal behind bars
2. In the gospel story today, no one would have been cheering for Zacchaeus, who it’s fair to say was playing the role of the villain
 - a. Except, as it turns out, for Jesus. Jesus seems to cheer for him
 - b. Zacchaeus had four strikes against him:
 - i. He was a tax collector
 1. To be a tax collector implies a dishonorable job
 2. It’s not about asking people to pay their fair share for the sake of society
 3. Instead, it was the way for governments to prop themselves up and enrich the rulers / kings / or Ceasar in this case
 4. AND the reality was that tax collectors were known for skimming off the top, because the government only cared that they got their share, so if you extorted some for your own pockets, well, that’s up to you
 - ii. He was a traitor

1. A tax collector was working for Rome, which was who was occupying Palestine
 2. They were seen as collaborators with the oppressors.
 3. They were on the wrong side
- iii. He as rich (see above)
1. Zacchaeus got rich by stealing
 2. In several places in the gospel Jesus presses people who are rich to be generous, and in fact, to give away all their wealth
 3. Which you can see why many rich people who heard Jesus went away disappointed
- iv. And he was short
1. Zacchaeus is described in terms of a shallow standard - tall is good, short is bad/undesirable
 2. It also points to the fact that he would have been made fun of well before he became a tax collector
- v. In other words, Zacchaeus was an easy target to hate, to be suspicious of
- c. But he does something that's out of character:
- i. Zacchaeus is curious about Jesus and wants to see him.
 - ii. He is not scheming to steal money from Jesus.
 - iii. Not trying to betray Jesus for money (that would be Judas).
 - iv. Not trying to confirm negative rumors about Jesus.
 - v. Instead Zacchaeus seems earnestly curious. Why?
 - vi. Likely because he had heard about Jesus, about his miracles (though he hadn't made anyone taller).
 - vii. Maybe he had heard about his teachings (which means he may have heard about how Jesus asked those with wealth to give it away)
- d. When the moment comes that Jesus passed by the tree that Zacchaeus had climbed, all Zacchaeus could have hoped for was to catch a glimpse of Jesus surrounded by the crowd, walking slowly on their way out of town. That was it. Just a sighting.
- e. But instead Jesus somehow knew he was being watched and knew the man's name and what he did. And still Jesus invited himself to dinner.
- f. And those around Jesus, especially those who were critical of Zacchaeus, now started judging Jesus!
- g. They hated Zacchaeus. They were now ashamed of Jesus. They saw Jesus, once again, hanging out with the wrong people. A sinner. A traitor. A thief. A short man to be made fun of.

- h. Zacchaeus knew of the way people despised him. He knew that his profession had him on the wrong side. He knew that he had done things he should not have done.
 - i. So Zacchaeus stands tall in the middle of dinner and responds aloud to the criticism that had been spoken under their breath:
 - i. he promises to give half of his possessions TO THE POOR.
 - ii. And that he will repay THOSE HE CHEATED four times what he stole.
 - j. One wonders if the hate hurled at Zacchaeus ever stopped, even after Jesus vouched for him, and reminded them he was as much a child of Abraham as they.
 - k. Jesus said salvation had come to Zacchaeus' home and that Jesus had come to rescue the lost. Maybe salvation was being welcomed back to community – which means salvation for the critics required embracing the new Zacchaeus.
3. In the polarized moment in American history in which we live, we can too easily fall for the trap that anyone who doesn't agree with me, with us, is an enemy.
- a. What's more, the trap is that anyone who doesn't agree with me, with us, does not deserve to be part of the community. In two extreme versions of that argument, we have experienced abhorrent political murders just this summer:
 - i. Progressive Democratic Minnesota State Rep. Melissa Hortman and her husband were murdered at their home on June 14, 2025.
 - ii. Last week Republican activist Charlie Kirk (someone who was anti-LGBTQ and anti-immigrant) was murdered during a political rally.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/11/us/charlie-kirk-views-guns-gender-climate.html>
 - b. As you and I try to get closer to what it is that Jesus teaches in the scriptures, one thing we can take away is that Jesus was always trying to bring people into community, not to push them out
 - c. He spent time with people others were too ready to hate, to blame for all their problems, and in so doing, Jesus was lifting up their humanity, their place at the table
 - d. We cannot fall for the sinful narratives that some people do not belong in community. Or that there is no way they will ever get right with God.
 - e. Jesus invited himself to dinner to the home of one of the most despised people in that community, and the crowd couldn't understand it.
 - f. In fact, the crowd turned on Jesus thinking he was now siding with the sinful, with the traitors.

- g. We lose our way when we single out a population or a group of people to blame.
- h. We lose our way when it is easier to point to what others do than to reflect on what we do.
- i. We lose our way when we grow indifferent to ways people are profiting from the polarization.
- j. So, I encourage us to take the strategy Jesus took, and sit at table together, rejecting the sinful polarization others want to impose on us.
- k. Sit at table and have a meal with a neighbor, knowing you may not agree on all things, and yet you will discover you agree on much.
- l. Sit at table and listen, truly listen, not while preparing a comeback argument, but listening with compassion because that person across the table is telling you of their pain, their fear, their hopes, their faith.
- m. Sit at table and share, really share, what the world looks like from your vantage point, how you see the words of Jesus guiding you, and how you are working to break down barriers.
- n. Sometimes that table will be the Thanksgiving meal with that uncle who drives you up a wall.
- o. Sometimes that table will be at a coffee shop with a friend who has grown distant since the polarization has escalated
- p. Sharing a meal or a coffee humanizes the conversation, and your partner in the conversation.
- q. Picture Zacchaeus at table with you, trying in his own small way to dismantle the wrong he had done, recognizing that profiting from division is sinful.
- r. And picture Jesus sitting next to you, and wonder how Jesus would support you both in the conversation.

Reflection questions

1. Remember a time in your life when you had a conversation with someone you deeply disagreed with.
2. How would you describe the transformation of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1–10)? How would Jesus want the crowd to be transformed also?
3. How is the cultural and political polarization of our time different/same from other periods in your lifetime?