

“Salvation Has Come to This House”

Richard C. Allen
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South Glastonbury
Connecticut

I love this word, ‘salvation’. If there is a central theme in the whole Bible, it is the theme of salvation. Salvation comes from a Greek word which means wholeness. To be saved is to be made whole or to be made complete or to be healed or to be forgiven or to be loved. Salvation is what God does in history and beyond history. This work that God does is the work of deliverance. When we pray in the Lord’s Prayer, “Deliver us from evil,” we are calling on God to do this work of salvation. We are praying, “Save us! Deliver us! Rescue us! Love us! Do that work which we are unable to do on our own.”

This is why salvation is a stumbling block to the one who is fiercely independent, stubbornly self-contained. I am familiar with this stumbling block because I grew up in a community of fiercely independent people, people who, if they couldn’t provide it for themselves, could just very well do without it.

The story of Zacchaeus is a salvation story. Zacchaeus is a broken man. He has sought wholeness but has found it not. Like the John Travolta character in the film, *Urban Cowboy*, he has been “looking for love in all the wrong places.” Zacchaeus has sought wholeness by accumulating wealth at the expense of the innocent tax payer. Zacchaeus is a tax collector. In those days, tax collectors were pseudonymous with evil. There was no such thing as an honest tax collector. If a citizen owed \$20 in taxes, Zacchaeus would inflate the rate in order to line his own pocket with gold. He had grown rich, but wholeness he did not find. He had grown wealthy, but salvation he did not experience.

In desperation, Zacchaeus climbs a sycamore tree to get a glimpse of Jesus. A glimpse is all he wanted that day. A glimpse is all he anticipated. I suspect he had heard through the grapevine that others had found wholeness through encounters with Jesus. I suspect he wasn't thinking of having an actual encounter with Jesus that day, only a glimpse of the man from Galilee.

But Jesus didn't come into town so that men and women could catch a glimpse of him, a mere photo opportunity. He came to town so men and women might have a meaningful encounter with him, a life-changing, life-saving, wholeness-bringing encounter.

Jesus, of course, sees the crowd lined up along the parade route. But it is Zacchaeus he spots. It is as if the stage has darkened and the spot light is shining right up there on the figure sitting in the sycamore tree. Jesus sees the broken one. And Jesus moves right in on him. "Come on down from that branch! Come on down Mr. Tax Collector Man! Come on down for I'm going to your house today."

I would give anything to have been a fly on the wall during that private lunch. What happens in that house on that day can best be described as salvation. Luke does not let us in on the conversation. No tape recorder was planted under the table. All we know is that Zacchaeus steps outside his house, calls a press conference, and announces, "Half my possessions I give to the poor. If I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much."

Then, Jesus steps to the microphone, "Today, salvation has come to this house."

Salvation is the gift Jesus brought to that house that day.

Zacchaeus had fallen into one of those deep patterns of destructive behavior that he couldn't get out of on his own. He had become addicted to power. He had become so totally consumed by the hunger for money and the power that money represents that he could not possibly see his own way to wholeness. He needed a Savior. He had lost sight of the people in his town as neighbors. He saw them only as tax payers. He saw them as potential sources of income for his own pension plan. Jesus invites Zacchaeus to think of the people in his town as neighbors to love rather than as customers to rip off. When you start to think of someone as your neighbor, the brokenness of the world begins to mend! For Zacchaeus, that was the beginning of his salvation. It's what Jesus brought to his house that day.

Zacchaeus reminds me of my favorite character in all of British literature, Ebenezer Scrooge. He is the Charles Dickens character who makes Bob Cratchet work long hours and won't pay him a living wage. He won't buy coal for the furnace. He is the tight-fisted, rich man in town but he is also the most damaged man in town. He is as fractured as a 1000 piece jigsaw puzzle strewn all over the house. He is so lonely it hurts to look at him.

In the night, he has these three encounters with the holy, with the ghosts of Christmas, ghosts who confront him, ghosts who speak the truth to him in love. They do not appear to him so he can catch a glimpse of them. They appear to Scrooge so he can have a life-changing encounter, so he can taste the sweetness of salvation.

When he finally "wakes up," it's as if he now sees Bob Cratchet as a neighbor and not just as an employee. He sends for the fattest turkey at the market to be sent to the poorest family. He orders the thermostat to be turned up! He gives Bob Cratchet a raise! He sees what he had not seen before. Salvation has come to his house! What a gift!

Ebenezer Scrooge could not in a million years have delivered this happiness to himself. He needed a Deliverer. And the Deliverer came in a dream.

In the Zacchaeus story, the citizens of the town see Jesus going into the house of a scoundrel and they voice their disapproval. "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." They don't get it! They don't understand his mission. He has not come to sit a cup of tea with those who have it all together! He has come to deliver salvation to those who know they need it. He has come to deliver salvation to those who are lonely and are tired of being lonely. He has come to deliver salvation to those who are sick and are sick of being sick. He has come to deliver salvation to those who have let their hearts grow hard and are tired of the hardness. He has come to deliver salvation to those who withhold forgiveness and for whom that withheld forgiveness has become a poison within themselves. Salvation. Deliverance. This is God's work. This is the work we can not do for ourselves.

Occasionally, I find myself identifying with the Prodigal Son in Luke's famous parable. He is the one who squanders his inheritance. Occasionally, I catch myself squandering my inheritance. One such inheritance is a beaded necklace given to me by the Reverend Jonah Little Wounded. He was one of those Lakota elders who had been ordained by Congregational missionaries in the 1930's. He spoke almost no English, but he exuded a genuine warmth. One day I was invited to attend a potluck supper after which Jonah Little Wounded would be telling his life story. And would I give the blessing at the meal. You bet I would! I would have done anything to be with his kind, loving elder; this human being whose suffering showed in the deep lines in his face, whose compassion for the world beams through his smile like light arising from an impressionist painting. I said the blessing, ate my supper, sat back to hear the story.

Jonah Little Wounded gave his story in Lakota Language. I couldn't understand one word of what he said. Not one word! But all the time I was there at that pot luck supper, in his presence, I felt a mysterious kind of healing, a kind of a oneness with the universe, a salvation really is what it was. I knew that God was in that place and for those few hours, I knew what Jesus meant when he said, "Salvation has come to this house."

Well, a few years later, it was time for me to move on to Wisconsin. The community had a farewell potluck supper in the church basement. Among the gifts there was a gift from Reverend Little Wounded. From the time I opened it, to the time I wrote this sermon, yesterday, that gift remained in my bottom drawer. It is a beaded necklace. Beaded into the necklace are the two words, "Jesus Saves." I have always known that Jesus does this work of salvation, this work of bringing wholeness to brokenness. But I tend to associate those two words with a brand of Christianity for which I have some suspicion and with which I have never felt at ease. "Jesus saves." It's good theology. Zacchaeus would agree. I guess it's the association with the segment of Christianity that is narrow and exclusive and haughty that has left the necklace in the bottom drawer these past twenty four years.

Today, Zacchaeus gives me permission to wear the necklace, not as a sign that I have become narrow or exclusive, but as a sign that salvation really is God's work and that we see Jesus doing this work. I am going to wear the necklace today as a memorial to my friend, in whose presence there seemed to be no distinctions, in whose presence there weren't Whites and Indians, only neighbors.

This is what I was wanting to share with you all, in the greatest of hope, Amen!

