

Many of the stories in the Bible are metaphors. That is, they are stories based on particular people at a particular time, but really, they could be about *any* person at *any* time. Today's story is one of these metaphorical stories and it shows us three fundamental aims of Christianity.

So let's think for a moment about this interesting, Jewish tax-collector named Zacchaeus. What do we know about this person? One interesting thing is that his name, in Hebrew, means "a righteous one." But this is very ironic! Any Jew in his day would have thought that Zacchaeus was the very opposite of a "righteous one"—they would have thought of him as *unrighteous*.

Remember that, at this time in history, the Jews were occupied by Roman forces. Israel was a "colony" of Rome, we might say. Let's do a short "mind experiment." Imagine for a moment that Japan was suddenly invaded and conquered by North Korea. So the North Korean Army was in control of Japan and North Koreans were the new leaders. Then imagine that the North Korean leaders convinced some Japanese people to collect taxes for them by saying, "Collect whatever you want—25% of their wages, 20%, 15%—it doesn't matter. Just give us 10% and you can keep all the rest for yourself. Our military police will protect you." How would you feel about a Japanese person who agreed to do that?

You would probably think that he was a traitor, right?

Well, that's exactly what was happening in Zacchaeus' time, and Zacchaeus was the tax collector. He had become filthy rich, but he had also become an outcast—hated by others in his community.

But one day, he hears that Jesus is coming to his town. Zacchaeus is interested. Zacchaeus is short (and maybe he's not so comfortable mingling in a crowd of people who don't like him), so he climbs up a tree to catch a glimpse of Jesus as he walks by. Maybe Zacchaeus is also *hiding* in the tree?

But a strange thing happens—according to this Bible passage, when Jesus walks by, Jesus looks up and says, "Zacchaeus, come down quickly—I want to stay with *you* tonight.." Well, that's strange! The crowd immediately begins to complain, saying "Why is he staying with a sinner?" The surrounding people are not at all happy about this. They think Jesus is wasting his time.

But an amazing thing happens to Zacchaeus. And this is the *point* of this story. Zacchaeus was a man trapped by his past. He had made mistakes—he'd extorted people. He'd betrayed his country. He felt like an outsider in his own home. He was a "nobody" in the eyes of everyone around him. Maybe he had lost his sense of self-worth. Then Jesus walked by, and called him by name—"Zacchaeus! *Righteous one!* I need *you*. Not just anybody—I need *you*. I need *you* to be an agent of this world's healing."

Through the power of these short words, Zacchaeus is transformed. He's freed from his past. Emancipation! Please take note of what this emancipation does to him—it brings spiritual and psychological *healing*. If you look back at the words of this story, it says that the man who was hiding in the tree now "stands up," turns to his fellow countrymen and says, "Lord, I want to give 1/2 of my wealth to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone, I will repay them 4 times over!" Wow.

The unrighteous man, Zacchaeus, is here reclaiming his true identity—his identity as "a righteous one." He takes back his name. He becomes who he was *meant* to be.

Emancipation—is freedom from the mistakes of the past. And Emancipation leads to *Healing*—a new sense of self-worth. And Healing leads to *Justice*—setting things right in the community. These are the three great aims of Jesus work, and they are the three great aims of Christianity. To free people from bondage to their past, to heal them with a promise of a fresh start, and to invite people to become agents of social justice.

This is the heart of Christianity.

This story is not just about a first century Jew named Zacchaeus, it's a story about me. It's a story about you.

It's very popular now to say "Let's for justice," but where does justice *begin*? It begins in our own emancipation from our past—from our sense of worthlessness or from our sense of guilt. Justice comes from our emancipation and our healing. Broken people can only build a broken world. Broken people cannot build a just one.

I invite you to think about what this story means to you, today. Poetically speaking—metaphorically speaking—have you heard these words of Jesus? "*You*—come down. I need you." We humans need to hear these words over and over again. Because when we truly hear them, spoken to us, we become free. So today, be free. Be healed. And be a part of God's healing of the world. Let's pray,

God, almighty life-giving power,
Find us wherever we are hiding today.
If you see guilt or regret or despair in us,
Make us free.
Let this day be the new beginning.
Through the power of Christ,
Amen.