

“Zacchaeus was a wee little man and a wee little man was he; he climbed up into a sycamore tree for the Lord he wanted to see.” Do kids still sing that in Sunday school? I kind of doubt it. But I remember that in singing it all those years ago, when we came to the part where Jesus looks up and sees Zacchaeus in the sycamore, we always shouted the line: Zacchaeus, you come down! For I’m going to your house today.”

And that short man skinnied down the tree, as fast as he could, to face the one who apparently wanted to see him as much as he, himself, wanted a glimpse of Jesus. It’s interesting that the name, Zacchaeus, means ‘the righteous one’, but that is certainly not how his neighbors saw him. He was a tax-collector, which does not mean that he worked for the IRS. Rather it meant that he was a traitor, working for the despised occupying power of Rome.

Nor was paying your taxes a matter of taking your paperwork to H&R Block, and hoping they will find all the deductions you can take. No, a tax collector of Rome summed up in his head what the payer was probably good for, and then set an amount a bit higher than that. He would turn into Rome the quota he had been given, and he could keep the rest. No wonder he was the richest man in Jericho.

But something different was happening now. Jesus asked nothing of Zacchaeus. He simply said that he must go to the man’s home that very day. But Zacchaeus rightly heard that to bring Jesus home was to let him get right up to the truth of his life. He spontaneously declared that he would give half his possessions to the poor, and if he had defrauded anyone, he would pay back four times what he had taken.

This was an incredibly powerful and costly action, as though everything in his life values had turned upside down. Where did it come from? Not from anything he had been told to do. Rather, he had looked at the face of Jesus, and Jesus had looked directly back, making no judgement. Everything was filled with a grace that was a call to profound repentance.

William Loader, is an emeritus professor of New Testament at the University of Perth, in Australia. He writes, “We do an injustice to this story if we reduce it to the cheap category of a wonder-conversion and fail to bring out that the conversion here means transformation which includes the budget. It is not about a soul being saved, as one popular translation puts it, but it is about revolution with revolutionary implications.”

Jesus preached repentance from his very first words in the very first Gospel: “...the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near. Repent, and believe in the good news.” In today’s story this same sermon has become a song without words, producing a deep change in the one who stood before him. Zacchaeus found that however shameful his life had been, he was called to bring Jesus home as his guest, and he wanted to receive his guest within a new life.

Perhaps we should be a bit wary when we hear words of scripture, for there’s no telling what roads God is opening in front of us. For repentance does not mean feeling sorry for what we have done. It means turning from our present path and going a different way. It carries the possibility of transformation and opening to new life. What if today, in this very moment, we are called to the revolution that needs our presence?

The woman who cuts my hair said to me this week, “2020 sure has been a hell of a year.” She was

referencing not so much the lethal virus, as the killing of a black man by a white police officer, which was filmed on a cell phone. When this action ripped the scabs off the racism of our body politic, we were plunged into days of protest. Some used the protests as cover for rioting and destruction.

Then, of course, came violent push back from police and National Guard. There were tear gas and plastic bullets, which seemed to be aimed as often at those who peacefully demanded change as those who burned the city with their fire. Fuses were lit all around our country and in most of the rest of the world. We have not previously seen such prolonged and wide-spread protests, marches and prayer vigils. Up until now our pervasive racism and white privilege have done their work under the cover of normality.

What if in proclaiming the lamentations of the enslaved, we are called to repent more deeply than we ever have before, perhaps "...including the budget," as William Loader put it? Of course, we could avoid the path of revolution, insisting that we are good people, who have not benefitted from racism and white power. Surely all of the current noise and furor are not our fault.

But we are called into the body of Christ where are all are knit together in the great web of connection that binds us to God, to the truth and to each other. We cannot bring Jesus into our lives and homes without bringing all the others who are part of this Great Cloud of Witnesses.

All who are trapped in poverty, by virtue of the color of their skin, bring a depth of suffering that is ours to carry as well. All whose unpaid labor built the wealth of our country, but remain shut out of it now, have a claim on our enjoyment of plenty. If we hear this as Zacchaeus did, if

we are drawn to a repentance as deep and as costly as his was, what will become of us?

The next steps lie ahead of us, with a call for lament and repentance, prayer and sacrifice, revolution pulling down the ancient barriers. This is one of the fracture points in history, when all must chose which side is owed allegiance. May it, for us, be God's Beloved Community that we hear, and towards which we press.