

19.11.3 “Unlikely Saints” - Rev. Adam Hange -  
Luke 19:1-10 - Zacchaeus

This morning we mark “All Saints Sunday.” Understanding that many of us come from many different religious backgrounds, that title may be meaningful to you, or it may not, depending on your prior religious experiences. First, let me say, that’s entirely OK! Second, let me say that here in the UCC, we tend to play a little fast and loose with the “high holy days.” I’d venture that UCC churches are celebrating today in many different ways, and some not at all.

For hundreds of years, perhaps since the 4th Century, the adherents of Roman Catholicism, and a few other mainline Protestant denominations, have celebrated festival of “All Saints” every November 1. Some historians suggest the day might have been added to the church calendar to sanctify the revelries of the night before - October 31 - Halloween. It was not a tradition that I grew up with, though it has become one dear to my heart - and not just because it happens to fall on my birthday!

Rev. Nadia Bolz-Webber, ELCA Pastor, Writer, and Speaker - (aka - “The Pastrix”) wrote a book entitled “Accidental Saints” where she begins by describing her congregation in urban Denver, CO - “House for All Saints and Sinners.” She writes that early in the life of the church, they began a practice of making “saint cookies” on All Saints Sunday - little gingerbread people with halos made of yellow frosting. Some saints were more or less recognizable: Joan of Arc, John the Baptist. Then there were also some less-conventional saints - “Mary Magdalene,

Cezar Chavez, Vincent van Gogh - complete with his a self-portrait - and a missing ear.

Webber writes of the celebration - *“Apart from those who have fallen in combat, Americans tend to forget our ancestors, and we spend as little time as possible publicly mourning them. But in the church, we do the very odd thing of proclaiming that the dead are still a part of us, a part of our lives, and are even an animating presence in the church. Saint Paul describes the saints as “a great cloud of witnesses,” so when they have passed, we still hold them up, hoping perhaps that their virtues - their ability to have faith in God in the face of an oppressive empire or a failing crop or a blight of cancer -- might become our own virtue, our own strength.”*<sup>1</sup>

All Saints is a day to remember those who have gone on before us. It's a day when we often name, or otherwise symbolize, those who have passed, especially in the last year - as well as those who have been heroes of faith to us through their lives. Perhaps you came this morning with a specific person whom you are remembering someone in your life. We mark this with the lighting of candles, the sharing of remembrances, and bless those we have loved and lost in song.

If you've done it once or twice, you sort of know what the celebration of All Saints is supposed to look and feel like. A little harder to answer is the question - **What does sainthood actually look like?** Today's scripture reading from Luke 19 is an opportunity for me to lift up one of the more “Unlikely Saints” - Saint Zacchaeus.

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<sup>1</sup> Nadia Bolz-Webber, “Accidental Saints: Finding God in all the Wrong People,” Convergent Publishers, New York, NY, p. 5

I did not grow up referring to him as such, rather, I grew up singing about him being a “wee little man who climbed up a sycamore tree.” However, a little online research has confirmed for me that he is, indeed, remembered as a saint in the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church - as Saint Zacchaeus or Zaccheo - and celebrated every August 23. Though we have little historical information on him other than what we read in this passage, legends have grown up around him, including one that is at least possible - that he became the 4th bishop of Caesarea in Palestine.<sup>2</sup> It is fascinating to me to imagine what happened to Zacchaeus after his encounter with Jesus. Have you ever thought about that? What happened next after this visit from Jesus?

Again, we’re a little too familiar with Zacchaeus to appreciate the power this interaction must have had on those who saw, or first heard the account. But remember, in the previous parables, Jesus’ teaching has challenged his listeners to broaden their ideas of who is welcomed within the circle of God’s favor and grace. Jesus goes from telling stories about radical inclusion, to building radically inclusive-relationships with an actual tax-collector.

Remember what I said about these tax-collectors last week? They were agents of the Empire, collaborators with the occupiers, cheaters and thieves, well-known to enrich themselves by exploiting their neighbors. They lived on the margins.

But Zacchaeus wants to see the real Jesus, so he does something completely undignified: he climbs a tree. He “goes out on a limb” hoping to see the real Jesus. And what happens? Jesus sees *him*. Calls to

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<sup>2</sup> <https://catholicsaints.info/saint-zacchaeus-the-publican/> - Accessed November 2, 2019

him! And invites himself to Zacchaeus' home. This was no small thing! Forget the fact that Jesus had the audacity to invite himself over to someone else's house for dinner. There were rules for observant Jews about the kind of people one could eat with. Jesus saw Zacchaeus - and decided they should be friends.

It was an unlikely pairing, a rabbi and tax collector, but Jesus was often accused of keeping strange friends... of constantly widening the circle in the name of the all-loving God. Jesus gave us an example, by metaphorically elevating the diminutive Zacchaes, and bringing him into the circle of relationship. It was a powerfully prophetic thing to do, and yet it is something we struggle with.

Of course, the crowd gathered round Jesus begins to grumble. They equate Zacchaeus' marginal status, with sin. This is a false assumption - but it belies our prejudices.

It makes me think of two modern-day stories - one, an example of how we so often fail in our judgment of others - and another, where in my humble opinion, we sometimes get it right.

The first story is from the recent - and I should say, unconfirmed report - that a priest, Fr. Robert Morey, at St. Anthony's Parish in Florence, South Carolina denied 2020 presidential candidate, Vice President Joe Biden, the chance to receive the eucharist (communion), because of his pro-choice stance on abortion. I say, unconfirmed, because Fr. Morey went to the press with this story, while Biden refused to say whether the priest's claim was true. It has caused some controversy within the Catholic church, as some have argued it was

wrong, and others have said it was in keeping with the church's doctrine. The quote is from some years ago, but more recently I've seen Pope Francis being quoted as saying, "*The Eucharist is not a prize for the perfect, but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak.*"

**That is, I believe, what Jesus understood, when he met Zacchaeus.** What's interesting to me about the story of Zacchaeus is that Jesus didn't judge or reject him. And Jesus didn't tell him to go find other work, though he could have. Knowing who he was, and what he did, Jesus saw this man, called out to him, and then accepted this man's hospitality, (actually, he invited himself to his house for dinner!). Then, when Zacchaeus promised to make restitution if he had cheated anyone, Jesus took him at his word that his repentance was sincere, saying to him, "today, *salvation* has come to your house."

If we thought Jesus' parables were radical, his actions are still more so. He erased the line that had previously been drawn between "us" and "them" and brought Zacchaeus into the circle of the relationship. I think that's what God is calling us to do today. To recognize one another, and those who have gone before, each and every one, as beloved and sacred. And to declare one another - holy and blessed.

It's not our job to decide who is a saint and who is not - who is worthy and who is not. I believe the truth is a paradox - that not one of us is worthy and at the same time, *every one* of us is worthy of God's love and blessing. That God sees us as "saints" even when we can't see ourselves that way. And, as I look around this room this morning, and think of you - as a great cloud of witnesses - surrounded by an even

greater cloud of witnesses, I think - we're all here, as "unlikely saints" because other "unlikely saints" had the faith to plant a church. Build a building. Start a choir. Teach Sunday School. Start a seminary to train pastors! We're here today, because of a whole host of other people and many other "unlikely" people who helped us on our way. Isn't that amazing! Isn't it amazing what the love of God can do!

The second story, is from a friend and colleague, Rev. Adam Ericksen, pastor of Clackamas UCC, who grew up in Forest Grove, and some of you know. Well, he, and the leadership of the church in Clackamas, have been using the church marquee to share some pretty radical and progressive faith-based messages in their neighborhood - messages that went "viral" and have been covered by national and international news. Due to the boldness of these messages, a group of adult entertainers/strippers reached out to him and the church, and asked if they could partner on a fundraiser to raise money for toiletries and other supplies for kids being held in detention at the border. It was... a little controversial. Not because of the fact that the kids had crossed the Border, of course, but because of who partnered on the fundraiser were in the adult-entertainment business! The church held a worship service - where these women (and some men) came and talked with the pastor and congregation about why they care about this issue. They built relationship around the "common ground" of caring for kids.

"The scripture tells us that God's love will find us  
no matter how far away we are from the word.  
Just like Jesus found Zacchaeus hiding in a tree,  
God will find us and bring us home.  
God has no respect of persons,

it does not matter what we have done wrong, we still belong to God.

We have the assurance, God will rescue us.

This is the good news of the Gospel!”

Franciscan Father and writer, Richard Rohr, writes that “In the thirteenth century, St. Francis of Assisi called people to “live on the edge”—of the Church, of economy, of patriarchy, of the “system”—through universal solidarity and chosen simplicity.”

So, this morning, as we pray for the saints we remember, those who are dear to our hearts - those who have been heroes of faith...I invite us aslo to pray for those who often go unremembered - those who might be “unlikely” to ever be nominated for “sainthood” in the conventional sense - but are nevertheless “holy” in the eyes of God.

We pray for those who are houseless, and live and die of exposure.

We pray for those LGBTQ who live, and die - experiencing violence.

We pray for our veterans, many who suffer PTSD, depression, and suicide.

We pray for the immigrant and refugee who live, and die trying to find safety, opportunity, and a better life.

In our eyes, they may not all “deserve sainthood.” Neither did Zacchaeus. Lucky for us, God’s ways are not our ways, God’s thoughts are not our thoughts. **Indeed, we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses - seen and unseen.**

Nadia Bolz-Webber goes on to tell a story about one of those cookies made All Saints Sunday. It was for a woman named Alma White. Nadia had been walking through downtown Denver with the quirky artsy friend whose idea it was to make the saint cookies, when they noticed a large memorial plaque on a church near the State Capital. It said, “Alma White, founder of the Pillar of Fire Church, 1901.” She got excited. “Alma’s a woman’s name right? A woman planted a church in Denver in 1901? As a female pastor - she needed to know more of that story - for she was pretty excited by the prospect of having a “role model” to look up to. It’s still a pretty big deal to have a female pastor lead a church in Denver! So she pulled out her phone and did a quick search, and learned that she had founded the church in 1901, and in 1918, Alma White became the first female bishop (Yes!) in the United States, and was noted for her feminism (Yes!) and her association with (wait for it) ... the Ku Klux Klan, anti catholicism, anti-pentecostalism, racism and hostility to immigrants.

I can’t say in the pulpit what Nadia wrote next in parentheses! Let’s just say she was disappointed! Her friend made Alma White into a saint cookie anyway. And while it was sort of hard to see her next to Saint Francis, Cesar Chavez, and Harvey Milk, she writes, “On All Saint’s Sunday” (we are) faced with sticky ambiguities around *saints who are bad*, and *sinner who were good*... She writes, “what makes us saints is not our ability to be saintly, but God’s ability to work through sinners.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Nadia Bolz-Webber, “Accidental Saints: Finding God in all the Wrong People,” Convergent Publishers, New York, NY, p. 6-7

Church, we are all saints and sinners in need of God's grace - yet capable of pointing one another towards God, and imagining together a vision of a better world. Let us pray for the faith to see with Christ's eyes, and the grace to love as God loved.

Will you pray with me?