

“Saints and Sinners”
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San Dimas Community Church, UCC

Who is a saint? People understand “sainthood” in different ways. Webster’s dictionary gives several definitions; one is “all the members of the early church.” Later the church elevated sainthood to people deemed to have lived extraordinarily holy lives, perhaps even being able to perform miracles. In Protestant circles we think of saints as people who are holy but not necessarily miracle workers or noted church officiates. Of course, some of you may think of a football team when you hear the word “Saints.”

And “sinners” is just as hard to define neatly and fit into a logical box. The Bible says we’ve “all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” That’s pretty obvious. But then folks begin to make distinctions between really bad “sinners” and all us other “sinners.” That’s why Zacchaeus provides such a good subject for a discussion of “Saints and Sinners.”

Sharon Ringe writes in her commentary that this episode starts out as a comedy. Zacchaeus is curious and very short. He’s also not very well thought of in the neighborhood. While all around him people are very poor and living on the edge of existence; Zacchaeus is a rich man, AND he is a CHIEF tax collector. Luke has written about tax collectors before in his gospel, and they receive fairly good press; but Zacchaeus is not only a tax collector, he is also very rich, and the crowd gathered would probably assume that some of their sweat and tears and money lined Zacchaeus pockets.

So Zacchaeus scrambles up a tree, a Sycamore tree, *for the Lord he wanted to see*. Perhaps he thinks the tree will provide cover from his not so kind neighbors as well as enough height to see over their heads. Then Jesus comes along, looks up, and says, in essence, “got ya.” There’s no hiding from Jesus; furthermore, Jesus invites himself in front of everyone to dinner at the house of the local sinner.

This story is very short. We might wish for more details. All we know is that when Jesus comes to Zacchaeus’ home, Zacchaeus makes some pretty astounding announces. First, half of his wealth he will give away to the poor (the Greek is present tense: “I give). Half of ones wealth is much more than required alms giving for good Jews. Second, if he’s defrauded anyone, he will repay them (not the required two fold) but four fold. Then Jesus makes a declaration, “Today salvation has come to this house,” and he also declares that Zacchaeus is a “son of Abraham,” a pretty high compliment for a person who the day before was considered the neighborhood sinner.

The first idea that strikes me in these few sentences is that salvation comes when Zacchaeus is restored to relationship with those of his community. Zacchaeus’ wealth has alienated him from his community. Remember that a person in his day might meet 300 people in their lifetime so it was hard to escape and only socialize with your clique. Zacchaeus is a lonely man. He has the resources that others need to survive, and yet, he has no friends.

His salvation comes when he extends his own well being to those who are not well, who need what he has; and this act of generosity restores him to the community. Salvation and community go together. The salvation of the one relates to the salvation of the many, and the salvation of the many relates to the salvation of the one.

I noticed something new this go round of studying this story. Zacchaeus doesn’t say that he **did** defraud anyone; he just says **if** he did, he’d pay back four fold. We don’t know that Zacchaeus is a sinner by acts of explicit deeds. What we do know is that he is caught up in a

system, a political/socio system, that by its very nature alienates him from the community; and being alienated from the community and its needs, also alienates him from God.

This week I spoke to an individual who was caught up in a system in which he had to either overlook illegal activity at the place where he worked or pay the price by losing his job. This person is not wealthy; he has no reserves to pay the mortgage until he finds a new job; and he has a family to support. He was in despair. Should he have overlooked the gross illegal action, held his tongue, refused to speak truth to power and be homeless?

We really do have systems of this world, Paul called them “powers and principalities”, that provide difficult choices. By the way, he chose to resign rather than provide implicit support of what was clearly illegal. And furthermore, because of your generosity to the pastor’s discretionary fund, you kept someone from becoming homeless this week just because he had the courage to tell the truth. Thank you for helping me to minister to others on your behalf!

Maybe Zacchaeus could have chosen not to be a tax collector; or maybe he chose to be a tax collector because he knew that someone else would be ruthless and that at least he would do what the “powers of this world” demanded without being cruel.

There’s another nuance about sin in this story. The UCC Statement of Faith says God seeks to save us from *aimlessness and sin*. Aimlessness is the sin of wandering without purpose and meaning to life. Zacchaeus was rich, but he was aimless and his life meaningless because he was alienated and lonely, cut off from relationships. So when Jesus declares him to be a *son of Abraham* he is declaring Zacchaeus restored as a member of God’s people. He now belongs. This is salvation!

For me, this story illuminates what makes a *saint*. A saint calls forth from deep within us our very best selves. It is in the presence of Jesus that Zacchaeus is freed to be his best self. In Jesus’ presence he wants to *be beautiful for God*. (I love that phrase that you used, Stan, in Bible study last week.) In the presence of the saints in our lives and the saints we study from our religious history, we find the strength, to rise above the systems of power and principalities that entrap us and compromise us. We rise to be our very best selves!

Just to give you a heads up, during our prayer time, I’d like to invite you to call out the name of someone who has been a saint to you; someone who has made you better than you ever thought you could be; someone in whose presence you blossomed and became more beautiful for God.

There are all kinds of systems in culture and society that seek to compromise us. I often remember the words (though I can’t remember who said them) that we are known by the integrity of our compromises.

We are not called to be perfect. God knows we are humans living within a world that often seeks to bring us down. But God sends us saints, those men and women and children in whose presence we rise above a world that tries to render us aimless, and in the presence of the Christ, we sense that we, too, can be beautiful for God, that we can be sons and daughters of Abraham, that we can belong and find our place in a long line of those who’ve through the centuries sought to follow in God’s ways. May we serve as saints to each other, calling forth the best within our world and within each other, so that today and in the days to come, we may be truly beautiful for God. Amen.