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Mother Deborah Ruins the Story of Zacchaeus

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Who is Adam Conover and why does he want to ruin everything? That is a question I asked when a parishioner introduced me to the comedian and writer and his TV show called “Adam Ruins Everything”. Well, I checked it out and it turns out, the TV show combines Adam’s skills at comedy, writing, and interest in history, data, and information to challenge commonly held cultural misconceptions in a 20 minute episode.

One example is an episode called “Adam Ruins Weddings” where Adam debunks the idea that people have always married for “true love” by bringing in historians and historical evidence who stated that for centuries marriages were primarily ways to make political alliances, strengthen economic situations, or grow labor sources. While he’s been called iconoclastic by some, I don’t see what Adam Conover is doing as an attempt to destroy anything. Instead I see what he is trying to do as actually promoting things like marriage in ways that are more respectful to people instead of trying to take advantage or use them for making money. My favorite part of each episode is how Adam shares what he knows in ways that are informative without being judgmental and how he uses information to open up an issue that invite us all in so that we can contribute to making meaningful changes. I don’t believe Adam wants to ruin anything as much as he is doing what he can with the gifts he has to help as many people as possible learn to see life and life situations in a new way, an honest and hopeful way where we can feel empowered to do what we can in all sorts of situations to make things better. He reminds me of a lot good preachers I know.

I was reminded of Adam Conover’s style of challenging popular misconceptions when I read through the story of Zacchaeus from Luke’s Gospel that we just heard: the one about a short, rich, sinner who Jesus inspired to change. I believe there are songs and flannel board presentations that sum it up that way. Such an interpretation is certainly easy to see and understand, but.....what if.....there was something else here....something totally unexpected, something different, something maybe even more applicable to us and our lives? And what if we miss it simply because we don’t look closer at this story that is only found in Luke’s Gospel?

So, with many apologies to Adam Conover, whom I hope does believe the adage that “imitation is a form of flattery”, and whom I not trying to copy or offend as much as I am attempting to lift up his style and intention, I now present to you:” Mother Deborah Ruins (if not everything, then at least) the Story of Zacchaeus.”

We can't jump into who Zacchaeus is without first looking at where he is. The author of Luke mentioned Zacchaeus is in the city of Jericho. Now some scholars tell us Jericho was a center of commerce so there you go, that is a place a chief tax collector can make some major cash. But we can't move on and ignore that other scholars and translators like Mark Davis remind us we've heard of Jericho before. Back in the other part of the Bible, the Old Testament, in the book of Joshua chapters 2-6. This part of Joshua also inspired a song about trumpets blowing and walls coming down and the Israelites making their first military victory as they went about conquering the Promised Land by beating the Canaanites who were living there. However there is more to that story than Joshua's leadership and that something more is a woman named Rahab. When Joshua sent spies to the city of Jericho to scope it out, those spies were taken in and protected by Rahab, who even provided them with information vital to their victory. In return for her courage and information, which she gave because she said she believed the Israelites were God's People, the Israelites spared Rahab and her family. And not only that, Rahab married one of the really important Israelite leaders and she appears in the New Testament in two (count them) places: one in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus and in Hebrew's list of heroes we sometimes read on All Saints. So Rahab, a woman, is remembered for her participation in bringing about God's will for God's People, and she was welcomed into God's People even though she was technically a Canaanite (a foreigner) and a prostitute. Those are not insignificant things, either one could have made her unworthy in the people's eyes, but she is considered a hero of the story and part of Jesus' line, playing a vital and memorable role in salvation history. The story of Rahab shows us that women can and do participate in God's plan and that we can't always judge someone by what they do for a living. So in just mentioning a city, the author of Luke could be giving us vital information about the person in this story, someone else living in Jericho whose occupation made him disliked by everyone.

All scholars, commentators, and historians will tell us no one in Jesus' day had much if any respect, regard, or liked tax collectors. Perhaps the only folks who were disliked more where the chief tax collectors. It wasn't just because they were rich, it was because of their job and who they worked with. Tax Collectors worked for and with the Roman Government, and remember no one liked the Roman government coming in and taking over their land, telling them what do, who to worship, and how to live. It didn't

matter that the Romans made roads or brought advances like plumbing, the people who were conquered by Rome did not like Rome. And they especially did not like Rome on tax day. Chief tax collectors, historians tell us, had to pay the Roman government up front, before they collected the taxes from their tax collectors who collected taxes from the people. Historians and scholars alike tell us that system was often taken advantage of, and there was a lot of cheating going on, people were over taxed, or unfairly taxed, and there were shady side deals. It is understandable how tax collectors were easy targets for people's anger. Even today, just think about how you feel when you get a letter in the mail from the IRS. Yeah. It's almost too easy to see why tax collectors would be labeled as sinners and bad and evil and of no worth. It is much harder if not impossible to imagine a good tax collector.

Yet if we look carefully, there is nothing in Luke's description of the Zacchaeus that indicates he's wicked, evil, sinful, arrogant, or any of the adjectives commentators and scholars have used to describe him. The author of Luke describes him as a chief tax collector and wealthy and was he trying to see Jesus; it is the grumbling crowd near the end of the story that calls him a sinner, not Jesus and not Luke. We'll return to that theme in a bit.

Luke's Gospel goes on to say that something was getting in the way of Zacchaeus being able to see Jesus, and what was contributing to that interference was the crowd and "his small stature". Now interpreters and scholars and commentators have a lot to say about that. Most of them all state that the term "small in stature" means Zacchaeus was short and an outcast no one liked so the crowd wouldn't let him near Jesus because Zacchaeus wasn't worthy. Both his height (or lack thereof) and position in society made him an outcast. This reminds me of Randy Newman's mean spirited song about Short People. Historians tell us things like strength and aptitude were thought to be evident not in how people behaved, but in their physical appearance. In other words, it's good to be tall and bad to be short. Short people were thought to be distrustful, tricksters, deceivers. Again, it is not that hard to imagine this being true in Jesus' day because it is true today. If you don't believe me just go to a school playground, watch a movie, or better yet listen to how people of all ages talk about physical appearance. In a culture that is fixated on winners and losers, winners are usually the biggest and losers are the smallest. We seem to have a real problem with small. One place I see that played out is in church size. Big churches are often labeled "successful" and small churches are often labeled "unhealthy" or in "decline" or in "trouble". Very rarely do we challenge that stereotype, but maybe we should.

Because God doesn't always seem to be on the side of the big, often God is with the small. The Bible is full of stories about how God speaks not to huge groups but to one person like Abraham or Moses. In the book Judges God tells a guy named Gideon to gather up an army to go fight the bad guys and Gideon does what he is told and then for several days God keeps telling Gideon to send people home because his army is too big. God wanted it smaller, because smaller is how people would know God was involved. Even Jesus' took 3 or 4 disciples from the 12 to be with him on certain occasions like the transfiguration on the mountain. It seems for God it isn't the size of the group or person that matters as much as what they do that counts. We might wonder, if God doesn't have a problem with small, why do we?

What I love about Zacchaeus is he is someone who knows how to handle a challenge. When he couldn't see Jesus because the crowds got in his way he didn't sulk. He didn't go home and say it wasn't meant to be. He made it happen. He ran ahead of Jesus and climbed a tree. Now, while I find this behavior creative problem solving, some scholars have said Zacchaeus' behavior is evident of his arrogance: literally elevating himself above the crowds to show he believes he is better than everyone else. Wow. When you start to read commentaries on this story it sometimes feels like the gloves come off when it comes to judging this guy. Not only did the people of the time not like Zacchaeus, a lot of modern scholars don't either. Other scholars are not so hard on the guy; they see Zacchaeus as so enthusiastic, so happy, so excited that Jesus is in town, that he'll do something as undignified as climbing a tree in order to see him. A few scholars were even reminded of the father in the parable of the prodigal son who ran to meet his son when he came home, as running was considered as undignified as tree climbing.

And it worked. Jesus saw him, and called Zacchaeus down from the tree and proclaimed he was going stay at Zacchaeus' house. We might wonder if Jesus should have asked instead of insisted on staying at his house. A few scholars are on record saying Jesus saw what a terrible sinner Zacchaeus was and said what he said in a tone that was scolding in manner, which is why he insisted. Some interpreters say that his statement isn't bossy but is evidence of the happy, joyful feeling of Zacchaeus's action. Zacchaeus' happiness was so contagious that Jesus wanted to stay with him, they say there was no evidence of Jesus' calling out any sin.

The part about Zacchaeus being a sinner came from the crowd who was grumbling. That's a good Old Testament word, grumbling. It is featured prominently in the story of the Exodus as the main activity of the Israelite people as they followed Moses into the wilderness. It's a long story, that pretty much goes that whatever

happened, all the people did was grumble against Moses and God because freedom from slavery really didn't live up to their expectations and was turning out to be more work than they had imagined. We can see grumbling was a phase the people of God went through as they learned what it meant to be free from slavery. So today we get to hear some more grumbling, a term that is as theological as it is descriptive. Once again folks are grumbling against what God is up to. In their grumbling they call Zacchaeus a sinner. But this brings up the question: is he what the people of the crowd accused him of?

Zacchaeus' response indicates otherwise. Now, I know our English translation today makes it sound like he is going to make a change. But that is not what it says in the Greek. Several translators including Eugene Peterson point out the verb tense is in the present, not the future tense. In other words, Zacchaeus isn't saying he is going to change, he is describing how he lives: he gives away half of his possessions and gives money to the poor, if he is found to have defrauded anyone he pays it back four times over. That is how he does business.

Which can be problematic if we've been assuming all this time that Zacchaeus is a wicked man. It also is problematic if we interpret Jesus' command to Zacchaeus to get down out of the tree as spoken critically or harshly. What if, despite these assumptions, Zacchaeus isn't an extraordinary sinner? What if Zacchaeus is just someone who has been trying to live what he believes despite having a job that makes him despised in the eyes of everyone even the people reading his story today? What if Zacchaeus isn't a bad guy who was rescued by Jesus but is someone who wanted to be like Jesus? Like Rahab helped Joshua back in the Old Testament. What if Zacchaeus is the new Rahab?

That might shed a more powerful light on Jesus' words about salvation in response to Zacchaeus' statement when Jesus said that day salvation has come to that house of Zacchaeus. Maybe Jesus wasn't talking about a change Zacchaeus will make, maybe Jesus was celebrating the faith he found in a man Jesus called a child of God, a son of Abraham. Maybe Zacchaeus is an unexpected person of faith who is part of salvation.

Remember, the word salvation doesn't just mean "saved", at least in the theological sense. According to the Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms, the word salvation means "acts of God bringing people into a right relationship with God and one another through Jesus Christ." A man who is modeling such giving who was believed to be a sinner simply because of his job is a lot like Rahab in showing the people of Jesus' time and us that salvation isn't just something we are given, it is something we participate in and embody, no matter what we do for a living. Zacchaeus

and yes, even comedian Adam Conover shows us how all of us can participate in salvation history when we use the gifts and skills and passions we have not for our own purposes, but to bring people closer to God and each other.

Instead of being a cute little story about a short guy who Jesus turned around, maybe this is a powerful short story about how all of us can see Christ in each other instead of judging each other by a person's employment status, or physical appearance, or class, or gender, or nationality, or age, or race. Maybe we can see the "ruined" version of this story as a challenge to look closer at all people with compassion and respect. I know that is not always easy. Especially as we draw closer to an election day that seems to pit us against each other instead of reminding us of the things we share in common. So maybe this story of the guy who climbed a tree to see Jesus is coming at just the right time, to remind us that no one is what we hear in gossip or grumbling. Instead we are all beloved children of God who can in what we say or do keep people from Christ, or help them see Christ. So what will we do and what will say to "ruin" other misconceptions so we all can come closer to God and bring God's Kingdom a little closer to all?