

The Lion in the Marble

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(**Luke 19:1-10**) – Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

I want to start with an image I first heard years ago from the late Henri Nouwen in his fine little book *Clowning in Rome*. It's a story that has been around a while and may be familiar to you, but the metaphor is compelling, I think.

A child wandered into an artist's studio and happened across a sculptor who was working on a large piece of marble. The man struck the rock purposefully with his hammer and chisel; chips of marble flew everywhere. It looked perplexing to the child. After a while the work seemed tedious and boring, so the child left.

Months later the child returned to see

the sculptor doing some detail work on the block of marble which had become a majestic and powerful looking lion. "Sir," the child said, "how did you know there was a lion in the marble?"

The sculptor answered, "I knew there was a lion in the marble because before I saw the lion in the marble, I saw him in my own heart. The secret is that it was the lion in my heart that recognized the

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lion in the marble.”¹

What is it in Jesus' heart that allows him to look at Jericho's chief tax collector and to see a man of generosity and great potential? How can we begin to see such potential in those who look so awful.

A little bit about tax collectors. In the Roman Empire, a tax collector purchased the license to be authorized to collect taxes for the occupying Roman government and its armed forces. There was no salary for a tax collector. A tax collector just charged whatever he could exploit and squeeze out of the tax payers, with the help of Roman soldiers, if necessary. When John the Baptist told tax collectors, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you," he was saying, in essence, "Get out of the business." A tax collector's income was his legal graft. Think corrupt subprime mortgage agents on steroids.

Rome exacted a heavy burden of taxes, primarily the poll tax and the land tax, but also smaller tolls, imposts, duties, tariffs and such. In a large, prosperous city like Jericho, the chief tax collector

would be extraordinarily wealthy. And hated. Zacchaeus administered an extensive and powerful system that extracted large sums of money to underwrite the occupation of Israel by Rome, and to fund the extravagant activities of the ruling elite as well as their ambitious military exploits. Few people in Jericho could have been as despised as Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector.

"Zacchaeus," Jesus said. "Hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." The reaction is immediate. "All who saw it began to grumble, and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.'" That sounds pretty mild to me. I imagine this is an act that could have provoked a riot, had Roman soldiers not been present. It was outrageous; scandalous. In that culture, to eat with another person was a public expression of acceptance, approval and friendship. Only the thoroughly corrupt and compromised, the arrogant and impious would have dined with Zacchaeus. Yet Jesus, a Rabbi, invites himself to Zacchaeus' home.

The other reaction is immediate. "He ...was happy to welcome [Jesus]. ...Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, 'Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.'" Stunning. His whole income is fraud. He's willing refund with interest. How did Jesus know that kind

¹I couldn't find my copy of *Clowning in Rome*, but did find the same story repeated in *Spiritual Direction*, by Henri Nouwen, Michael Christensen & Rebecca Laird, p. 16-17

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of lion was in that marble?

How do we train our eyes to see the potential good within those people and circumstances that repel us?

I remember Thich Nhat Hanh's interview right after 9-11. He is a Vietnamese Buddhist monk who worked rebuilding villages destroyed during the war in his country. He knows war personally; he knows the smell of a village massacred. Soon after the tragic attacks on the U. S., Thich Nhat Hanh was asked what he would say if he could speak to Osama bin Laden.

If I were given the opportunity to be face to face with Osama bin Laden, the first thing I would do is listen. I would try to understand why he had acted in that cruel way. I would try to understand all of the suffering that had led him to violence. It might not be easy to listen in that way, so I would have to remain calm and lucid. I would need several friends with me, who are strong in the practice of deep listening, listening without reacting, without judging and blaming. In this way, an atmosphere of support would be created for this person and those connected so that they could share completely, trust that they are really being heard.

After listening for some time, we might need to take a break to allow what has been said to enter into our consciousness.

Only when we felt calm and lucid would we respond. We would respond point by point to what had been said. We would respond gently but firmly in such a way to help them to discover their own misunderstandings so that they will stop violent acts from their own will.²

That answer humbles me.

I find I become so angry and so reactive when I see people whose acts and words violate values I hold dear. I want to stop them; punish them. I imagine diatribes that would correct and properly humiliate them. I don't look to offer them dinner invitations.

When Barbara Crafton was here, she said that she puts the people she most despises first on her prayer list. She urged us to pray for our enemies, but carefully. She said pray blessings for them, but don't linger too long. At least not long enough to suggest to God what kind of blessing would be most appropriate for them, lest our hostility spoil our prayer.

Inside every human being is a child of God. Sometimes that image is hidden beneath cold rock-hard surfaces.

At the very core of your being is a child

²An interview by Anne A. Simpkinson of beliefnet.com

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of God. You are God's beloved. Only when we know our true identity as God's beloved – safe, secure, infinitely loved – can the child of God in us recognize the child of God in the other. Too often we are blinded by our own hostilities and fears. We tend to judge ourselves harshly, and then we are more likely to project our darkness on to others.

Part of what we do here every week is to return to our origin, to our home in the heart of God. We bring our weakness and failure and guilt and give it all to God, who accepts everything with infinite mercy and love. We renew our identity as God's beloved children, infinitely valued and cherished. We are fed with heavenly food and strengthened, so that we may leave this place renewed, refreshed – like happy lions. Majestic and strong, unafraid and secure – ready and willing to see the image of God in every other person, place and circumstance, including those, like Zacchaeus, who are so profoundly disguised.

We will leave this holy place resolved to continue to chip away at all the hard rocks that hide God's presence, strong enough to persevere with patient vision, because we can imagine the lion within – the hope,

the possibility, and the sure presence of God deeply alive within very fabric of all creation. The secret is that it is the image of God within our own hearts that will allow us to recognize the image of God in all its hard, marbled disguises.

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