

March 3, 2013  
Questions for Questionable Times

*Am I Accepted?*  
Luke 19:1-10

**Opening words:** This is the final message in my sermon series, *Questions for Questionable Times*. We have been looking at spiritual questions our society is asking. The answers have come directly from the Bible. In the past two weeks we answered these two questions:

1. **Where is God?**
2. **Who is Jesus?**

This is the question we will answer today: **Am I Accepted?** The answer to that question comes from our Gospel lesson for today, Luke 19:1-10. May God give you ears to hear.

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**Luke 19:1-10** <sup>1</sup> Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. <sup>2</sup> A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. <sup>3</sup> He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. <sup>4</sup> So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

<sup>5</sup> When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." <sup>6</sup> So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

<sup>7</sup> All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."

<sup>8</sup> But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

<sup>9</sup> Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. <sup>10</sup> For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

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We conclude this sermon series in the nineteen chapter of Luke. The story is unique to Luke. That is not a bad thing because no one can tell a story quite like Luke. You wouldn't want to change a single word. This story is the perfect example.

According to the story, Jesus is in the town of Jericho. In other words, the Master is about fifteen miles northeast of Jerusalem. Once again, a large crowd is following Jesus. Everyone wants to see Jesus because everyone has heard about his healings. One of the individuals who longed to see Jesus was a man named Zacchaeus. Everyone in that community knew his name. He was notorious because he was the chief tax collector. (Luke 19:2) Do I have to say more? Even in our time, the title of tax collector holds a stigma. In his day, the title went to a new level of low. Tax collectors were seen as traitors. They sold out their citizenship to the oppressing Roman Empire.

They were interested in one thing, money. Zacchaeus was the chief tax collector. In other words, the local tax collectors answered to him. Jericho was part of a prosperous region, so Zacchaeus was a rich man. However, the story is not really about wealth. The story is really about acceptance. The one thing Zacchaeus can't buy is acceptance. Longing to see Jesus, he climbs a stout sycamore tree. From that position, he accomplishes two things. First, from that position he can see Jesus. Second, from that position he was far away from the crowd, who wanted to harm him. Using your sanctified imagination you can see him. He is *in* the crowd but he is not *part* of the crowd.

Have you ever been in a crowd but not part of the crowd? You are the only black and white face in a color picture. You are silent in a room that is filled with laughter. It is like you are speaking a foreign language. It is like everyone is deaf to your voice. You are the only one who doesn't get it. You know it is true. You can be shoulder to shoulder with people and be completely alone. If you have, then you are like Zacchaeus. He was part of that community, but he didn't feel like a member. He had everything you can buy, but he was living an isolated life. Those words must have been music to his ears. *"Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today."* For the first time in his life he felt accepted! Never take being accepted for granted. Do you feel accepted? Have you ever been in a crowd, but not part of the crowd?

Today, I want to ask you three questions. Each one revolves around the issue of acceptance. Each one is illustrated in the story of Zacchaeus. These are my three questions for you. First, how do others feel about you? Second, how do you feel about yourself? Third and finally, how does Jesus feel about you? Remember we are trying to answer the question **Am I Accepted?** I hope your answer is YES! George Orwell once said, *"Happiness can exist only in acceptance."* So if you are ready to begin, say, **"Amen!"**

### **How do others feel about you?**

This is question number one. How do others feel about you? Don't try to answer the question by saying, "I don't care." The truth is you care and so do I. How others feel about you is one of the great preoccupations in our lives. It is why Zacchaeus is sitting in the sycamore tree. He is up there for two reasons. First, he is "vertically challenged". In other words, he is short and can't see over the crowd. Second, he is up there because no one likes him. Everyone hates him. He is in the tree because he doesn't want to be assaulted. How much of your behavior is influenced by what others think?

In the world of United Methodism is this appointment season. Pastors are learning about impending moves this summer. Pastors move for a variety of reasons. Sometimes, the pastor asks for a new church. Sometimes, the church asks for a new pastor. Sometimes, the bishop needs you to move for the good of the system. They work from top to bottom.

The bishop begins by appointing new District Superintendents. Their job is to oversee the United Methodist congregations in a certain area or district. For example, we are in the Mahoning Valley District. When I attend clergy meetings, someone always asks me, "Would you like being a District Superintendent?" I answer, "No! It is a hard job, but I would like to be asked." Why? I would like to be asked because that means I am respected by my peers. Does anyone here not want to be respected by their peers?

On March 24, Palm Sunday, I am scheduled to preach at the Lenten service at Canfield United Methodist. I always look forward to that opportunity and I always work hard to be prepared. I make extra sure my interpretation of the text is correct. I make sure my message is well thought out. I make sure my thoughts are well organized. On that day, I will go home after being here all morning and take a nap so I have the energy to deliver my message with energy. I want to bring my "A Game." Why? Because, I will not only be standing in front of my peers, I will be standing in front of this community. I don't want to look bad, and I don't want Western Reserve to look bad.

It isn't just me, it is you. Does anyone here want to see their name in the paper because of bankruptcy? Does anyone here want to see their name in the paper for a divorce? What rubs salt into the wound of those horrible experiences is public opinion. Don't tell me what others say doesn't matter. You know it is true. You do care about how others feel about you. If you can agree with that statement, say, "**Amen!**"

### **How do you feel about yourself?**

This is question number two. How do you feel about yourself? I live in a female dominated home which means one thing. I have been watching bad television for years. I usually get control of the remote control after 11:30 PM. I have missed a lot through the years. When I could have been watching the World Series, I was watching the show about picking out the right wedding dress. When I could have been watching the NBA play-offs, I was learning what not to wear. When I could have been watching ESPN, I was learning about the most fashionable colors. TV at my house exists on a low level. How many more singing stars do we really need? However, recently we have hit an all-time low.

It has become part of my Monday night routine to watch *The Bachelor*. Have you ever watched *The Bachelor*? Do you know how it works? There is one bachelor and a pack of hot women. They go on dates individually or in smaller groups so the bachelor can get to know them. Usually, the date involves a helicopter in some exciting spot. (Kathryn and I will be married twenty-five years in May and we have never been on a date in a helicopter.) Every week the bachelor passes out roses. If you get a rose then you get to stay. If you don't get a rose then you have to go home. There is always a surplus of emotions. The women are crying and swearing they will never trust again. The bachelor is devastated because he may have said good-bye to his one true love. He will never see them again. This is my question: why doesn't he just look her up on Facebook?

Last week, I walked into the room just in time to see the bachelor, Sean, talking to Catherine on the couch. She begins to cry and tells Sean about her shortcomings. She feels fat and ugly. She can still hear people from her past laughing at her. This is the worst part. She doesn't even like wearing a swim suit! Can I tell you the truth? She looked good to me. She looked good to Sean. A few minutes later they were off to the 'fantasy suite'. (I think that is where they watch Disney movies!) This is the point. It does not matter what other people think about you. The only thing that matters is what you think about yourself. How do you feel about yourself? Zacchaeus saw himself as an undesirable person. Do you see yourself as an undesirable? Are you able to see just how wonderful you are? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

### **How does God feel about you?**

This is question number three. How does God feel about you? Let me answer that question by giving you three Bible verses. Listen to these words:

**Psalm 31:16** *Make your face shine on your servant; save me in your steadfast love!*

**Psalm 86:15** *But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.*

**Psalm 136:26** *Give thanks to the God of heaven, for his steadfast love endures forever.*

Take these steps with me. Those three Bible verses make the same point. God loves us! Those three Bible verses came from the Psalms. They are all from the Old Testament. That means each one of these verse was available to Zacchaeus. He could have read these words. However, he never accepted the words. How easy it is to place something in your brain; how hard it is to apply that information with your heart. Zacchaeus knew God loved him. The problem is, he didn't *believe* God loved him. Do you know of someone who *knows* God loves them in their head, but who doesn't *believe* God loves them in their heart? Do you know of someone who thinks God is ashamed of them? How does God feel about you? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"** This is the question. Am I accepted? The answer is YES!

The story ends with Jesus inviting himself to Zacchaeus' home for supper. It does not mean that Jesus was cheap. It means that Zacchaeus was accepted. As they sat down to eat that supper, everything changed because Zacchaeus was accepted. This is the good news for today. You are accepted too. You are invited to come to eat with Jesus. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**