

You may recall, the early believers were not called Christians. They were called the followers of the Way -- The way of Jesus. It was different from the religion they were taught most of their lives. Instead of following laws to practice their faith, they followed the radical way of Jesus. It became a way of life filled with extravagant love and compassion that embraced all people – the just and unjust.

At the beginning of this story, Zacchaeus was one of the unjust. He was a known sinner. A sinner to a Pharisee was a Jew who did not follow the law. But, Zacchaeus did more than not follow the law. He was the chief tax collector in the large city of Jericho. He would've had many tax collectors working under him, which hints to how wealthy and powerful he was.

Tax collectors, even today, are generally not liked by the people who have to pay them taxes. But, in the biblical culture, the hatred runs deep. The Roman Empire followed the hierarchal social structure, and most of the people in the lower classes did not have a good chance for advancement – except for the tax collector.

Tax collectors were lower-status people who bought their way into higher status in the Roman system.¹ The way the system worked was that “governors ensured that peace and prosperity flowed down from the emperor, and tax collectors made sure that cash came up from the bottom to pay the military and enrich the noble classes at the top.”² Tax collectors were “the middle man” who made the system work, but often got caught in the middle.

It was common practice for tax collectors to skim off the top. They were

allowed by Rome to charge more taxes in order to pay for their service. That’s how they got paid.

However, those beneath them in social standing, hated them, because they were taking their money, and those above them, distrusted them, because they thought they might be taking more than their fair share. Zacchaeus was very wealthy, so he was taking more than his fair share. The people despised him because he not only cheated them, but he was also considered a traitor. He was Jewish, yet he worked for the Roman government, and he got rich from cheating his own people.

Zacchaeus was a climber, and not just of trees. He climbed the hierarchal structure to be higher and more powerful than the other classes. And, because he achieved it by cheating and dishonest means, he was cast out from his own community. He was all alone in that sycamore tree, separated from the crowd.

Then, Jesus comes to town and calls Zacchaeus to a better life, a grateful life, a generous life. When Jesus sees him in the tree, he looks up to him. Jesus is in a lower social standing than Zacchaeus, as the scripture describes.

But, Jesus calls Zacchaeus to come down from his higher status to be on equal footing with him, and then invites himself over to Zacchaeus’s house. This is a startling breach of etiquette. Lower-status people never invited themselves over to the homes of higher-status people. Zacchaeus should have invited Jesus over because he held the power in their society. Jesus showed Zacchaeus a new way.

¹ Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful*, 157.

² *Ibid.*

And, as scripture said, Zacchaeus “hurried down and was happy to welcome him” (v.8). Hospitality was a huge part of Jewish culture. They fed and housed travelers lavishly. Zacchaeus went back to his roots and generously welcomed Jesus into his home. He no longer cared about etiquette or the power structure, because he was so grateful to receive the gift of Jesus.

Jesus invited Zacchaeus down from the tree and his higher status to join him around the table where everyone is equal. Jesus calls Zacchaeus by name to live a new life that will save him from being an outcast, from being hated, from a life of sin. Zacchaeus accepts this gift of salvation and responds with extravagant generosity.

Zacchaeus is so grateful that he responds by giving 50% of his wealth, and he promises to pay back four times as much as he cheated people. This goes beyond what Jewish law demands of 10%. Following the way of Jesus, to give so extravagantly, is what Zacchaeus is called to do.

This is what Jesus calls us to do. This is what we do as followers of the Way. We are called to live the grateful way, the radical way of extravagant compassion, love, and generosity. As Jesus shows Zacchaeus the way, a new way of living, Jesus shows us as well. Jesus calls us by name to come down from what separates us from our community, so that we can all gather around the table as one, the just and the unjust. Please join me in the closing prayer:

Abundant God, “there are days we do not feel grateful. When we are anxious,

angry, or alone. When we do not understand what is happening in the world, or with our neighbors. We struggle to feel grateful.

But, [today], we choose gratitude. We choose to accept life as a gift from you. We choose to be grateful for the earth from which our food comes; for the water that gives life; and for the air we all breathe.

We make the choice to see our ancestors, those who came before us, and their stories, as a continuing gift of wisdom for us today. We choose to see our families and friends with new eyes, appreciating them for who they are. We will be grateful for our neighbors, no matter how they will vote or how much we feel hurt by them. We choose to see the whole planet as our shared community.

Giving God, we do not give thanks. We choose it. Just like Zacchaeus. And we will make thanks, with strong hands and courageous hearts. When we see your sacred generosity, we become aware that we live in an infinite circle of gratitude. That we all are guests at a hospitable table around which gifts are passed and received. We will not let anything opposed to love take over this table. Instead, we choose to see grace, free and unmerited love, the giftedness of life everywhere, as the tender web of all creation. In this choosing, and in the making, we will pass gratitude onto the world.

With you, and with all of us gathered here, we pledge to choose gratitude and to make thanks in our lives, in our faith community, and in our world³. Amen.

³ Paraphrased and some words/sentences altered from Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful*, 198.