

Simplicity: Identity

Luke 19:1-10

Rev. Jenaba Waggy

October 30, 2022

One of my favorite films when I was a kid was the 1973 Walt Disney animated feature *Robin Hood*. I didn't need to know who Roger Miller was to know that I fell in love with the kind and clever fox who cared about the common folk and was frustrated by the greedy Prince John. If you haven't seen the film, I highly recommend it.

While the historical figures who inspired Robin Hood are a lot more complicated, the film is very much a Disney binary: Robin Hood is good, and the sniveling Prince John is bad. In fact, he is truly a cowardly lion aided and abetted by Sir Hiss, a snake in a hat and coat that is forever hilarious in the reality that snakes don't have shoulders. Part of why Prince John is bad, the film tells us, is that he keeps trying to catch and imprison Robin Hood—Robin Hood, who only wants to have parties in the forest and make sure the rabbit family has enough to eat. The various cronies and guards of Prince John speak of Robin Hood as someone treacherous, dangerous, and awful; the audience, of course, knows that all those adjectives really apply to John and his ilk. It is a battle of who Robin Hood is, and the intermittent songs of Alan a Dale give us guidelines about who we're supposed to believe about the identity descriptions being tossed about. Fortunately, when King Richard (a much more regal lion) returns, there is lovely guitar music and a wedding to tell us that the true identity of Robin Hood has won out and he and Maid Marion are free to live happily ever after as the good foxes they are.

My apologies. Spoiler alert, if you've not seen the film.

We continue our series on "Simplicity" this week by talking about simplifying not only our stuff, as last week, but also our identities. It's an apt topic the day before Halloween, when costumes are celebrated and the idea of not knowing who someone is takes on a festive rather than frightening air. Whatever costume you are—or decidedly are not—planning to wear tomorrow, you likely understand how to be slightly different versions of yourself in different situations.

That's not to say that you have fully different identities, necessarily, and hopefully none of you are being hounded by the terrible Prince John as an outlaw. But we all do some form of tailoring of ourselves; the parts of us we bring forward for a Friday night out with friends are probably not going to surface at Sunday lunch with Great Aunt Catherine. It's good, to have variation; it's less good to feel like we *have* to alter ourselves in order to fit. Remembering not to swear in front of one's great aunt is a courtesy; having to pretend to have a different job or a job at all is an imposition. Choosing to downplay a partner to avoid teasing is one thing; having to hide one's significant other for fear of backlash is a cruelty. When altering pieces of one's persona is not a choice, it is no longer the same as being respectful of relational boundaries.

This is a truth known by marginalized communities in all sorts of ways: having to fundamentally shift one's mode of presentation or communication so as not to be ostracized or endangered by a community is not an inconvenience but an unhealthy imbalance. Being complex is human; being forced to mask oneself for survival is injustice.

We discovered some of the difference during the pandemic, when a lot of the lines between our voluntary personas blurred. Rightly so; when the world becomes mostly confined to a box on a screen, it's harder to remember why we needed all the masks in the first place. Our energy turned less to hiding our hobbies and more to hiding our sweatpants and we began asking questions about who was really in charge of setting all the expectations, anyway. It was good, and unexpected, and healthy to look at the identities we held and realize we didn't actually need all of them. Now, however, as we try to navigate a world irreversibly altered by the pandemic, a lot of us are picking up masks again as though they're anything other than painful.

The gospel story this morning has, hopefully, gotten the Zacchaeus song stuck in your head as firmly as it's been in mine. This is a story of identities: Zacchaeus, we are told, is a tax collector—not only that but a *ruler* of tax collectors. He was *rich*, rich enough that Luke the gospel writer wants to make sure we know it in a sentence that has little bearing on anything else; a man in Jericho was wealthy. It looks like the cue to us who come to this reading that this will be a story of Jesus' transformation of this little guy while everyone around them nods sagely about the corruption of money. After all, both the sermon of last week and the texts right before this scene are about the dangers of having too much attachment to one's wealth. Easy peasy, Zacchaeus will be changed and we'll all go home to eat Halloween candy with our reminder that the love of money is the root of all evil.¹

Except Luke's story doesn't quite follow our expectations. Zacchaeus, set up to be an arrogant tax agent, wants so badly to see Jesus that he runs ahead of the crowd and climbs a tree. I don't know if any of you have tried climbing a tree lately, but it is not a dignified affair no matter your height. And a grown man sitting in a tree looks ridiculous in any age, so Zacchaeus—already on the outside of his community owing to the distaste for his job, already aware of the ways his identities are defined as unwelcome—sacrifices his propriety because that's how much he wants to see Jesus. Who else in Scripture do we see giving up the identity of respectability because it's not as important as connecting with the Christ? The disciples; the poor; the outcasts who become stars of the stories about how we are not called to judge. Zacchaeus has been presented to us as the sheriff of Nottingham but suddenly he looks a lot more like Little John. Even his name is a clue from Luke that things are not what they seem: “Zacchaeus” means “purity” or “righteousness.”²

Jesus rewards Zacchaeus' courage by stopping at the tree and calling up, “Zacchaeus, come down at once. I must stay at your home today.” The crowd, of course, grumbles. They *know* who Zacchaeus is: a traitor, a swindler, a puppet of Rome. Sarah Dylan Breuer notes that, “The crowd presumes that Zacchaeus [sic] hoards his possessions and not only cheats the people, but fails to pay the penalty, and so when Jesus invites himself to Zacchaeus' [sic] house, Jesus joins their set of THOSE people, the sinners. But Zacchaeus [sic] is not a cheat, nor does he hoard his wealth; as he says, ‘I give half of my wealth to the poor, and if I find I have defrauded anyone, I pay back four times as much.’ These are things he is already doing, even before meeting Jesus. This chief tax collector, who receives only disdain from his neighbors, is actually far more generous and intentional about doing justice than is the respectable ruler of Luke 18:18-25.”³

¹ Cf. 1 Timothy 6:10

² [Journey with Jesus - Previous Essays and Reviews](#)

³ [Dylan's lectionary blog: Proper 26, Year C \(sarahloughed.net\)](#), 2004

It may not be the usual way we read this story, but the verbs Zacchaeus uses when he talks about the things he does are all in present tense in the Greek. “The Episcopal priest Elizabeth Kaeton notes the several ironies here. The despicable Zacchaeus is the generous one. The traditional interpretation that Zacchaeus is a sinner who's converted ‘tricks us into committing the very sin that the story condemns. It presents Zacchaeus not as a righteous and generous man who is wrongly scorned by his prejudiced neighbors, but as the story of a penitent sinner.’

“‘Turns out,’ says Kaeton...‘Jesus is once again turning our world upside down, confronting us with our assumptions about who is good and who is evil and demonstrating for us the tricks we play in our minds before we treat one another — one way or another. Like the crowd murmuring about Zacchaeus, it is easy to be blinded by our prejudice of ‘those people’ and find ourselves accusing the very person or people we should be emulating.’”⁴

“He, too, is a son of Abraham,” Jesus says about this ruler of tax collectors, this person everyone thought they knew. Jesus doesn't care how many different identities other people have given Zacchaeus, or how sure they are that he's the bad guy here; Jesus cares about the identity God has given him, the recognition that this man who scrambled up a tree is a beloved creation. Jesus tells the whole town to rethink who Zacchaeus is, and Luke tells us the same as we read. As ever, Jesus looks at the good-and-evil binary we humans have created and says, “Let's rethink this.”

In our Simplicity series, we're talking about what is needed and what we can shed. As we've returned to in-office jobs or retooled what working from home looks like; as kids return to school and after school activities; as our culture tries to force a “return to normal” as though what we had before the lockdowns was anything normal, what identities have been given to you? Do they fit? Are people telling you that you are one thing when you know, in your heart of hearts, it is not true? Have people decided that you're Bad Prince John, or Good Robin Hood, without letting you be the wonderfully awful fullness of you?

Have you been doing that to yourself?

It is so easy to take on the pressure of others in fitting a role—a kind of “go along to get along” in the hectic rush of a world revving back into motion after two years of comparative stillness. It would have been easier for Zacchaeus to accept that he was not welcome, not good enough, but he insists to the Jesus for Whom he climbed a tree that no, there is more than that, there is depth to this ruler of tax collectors. We, the readers, don't get any more of the story; we don't get to see what salvation in his house looks like or whether the neighbors are suitably chastised for their assumptions. The gospels rarely tie off the narrative threads with a lovely guitar piece and the triumphant return of King Richard, but that encourages us to take the story we have and see why it might matter to us. Zacchaeus, at the end of the day, has a lot of identities: he is a man who climbs trees, a tax collector, a rich person, a short person, a man who hosts a travelling rabbi, an outcast, an oddity. But the one identity that matters to Jesus is that he is a son of Abraham; he is one of God's, and everything else is subordinate to that.

As you go through the identities that may be stacking up for you: rich, poor, successful, scraping by, family person, single person, straight, queer, Scottish-American, African-American,

⁴ [Journey with Jesus - Previous Essays and Reviews](#)

DC fan, Marvel fan, coffee lover, tea drinker, professor, accountant, quilter, woodworker, Christian, questioning, whatever—hear this reminder that you, too, are one of God’s. That’s where everything else is anchored. That’s the foundation of any other identity you hold, and the measure for all of them. If you’re being asked to hold an identity—by someone else or by you yourself—that contradicts you being a beloved child of God, ditch the identity. You do not need it, and it is not helping you.

Easier said than done, for sure, and it takes time to tease out all the parts we play in the various stages of our lives. So in the thirty days you’re taking to sort through stuff, keep an eye on who you’re being asked to be and start sorting through the identities you accept as definitions of you. Are they in line with being God’s? Great, keep them. Do they require you make yourself smaller, lesser, unwelcome? Toss them like the garbage they are.

And go listen to the Robin Hood soundtrack while you’re sorting. It’s good music.

May we remember who and whose we are; may we not ask others to be less than God’s beloved; and may we refrain from thinking we know everything about a person from one piece of information. Amen.