

A Blemished Body

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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."

Most translations, including the one I just read, show Zacchaeus repenting of extortionate behavior when he hears the grumbling of the crowd. In these translations, he says roughly, "Okay, I see how wrong I've been, I'm going to make it right going forward." We accept that interpretation because he's a chief tax collector, a real baddy in Bible land, and he's rich — if you're rich and a tax collector, you don't exist unless you give your heart to Jesus. That might be the dominant preaching around this text as well. However, we have options in translation.

You could translate it as the tradition does, which is future tense, or you could translate it as iterative, that is, as an ongoing thing: "I do this all the time." That's the minority report. These scholars say that the "repentant" Zacchaeus can't be right because the text doesn't depict him as a repentant person. Zacchaeus doesn't beg for mercy; doesn't actually acknowledge wrongdoing; instead, he's thrilled to have Jesus in his house; he stands there, amid all that criticism, and says what he says. He hears the grumbling and he knows how it is, you need to speak for yourself or others will speak for you. And he speaks for himself, to the Lord, as if to say, "This is what I do, as a matter of practice, half of my possessions I give to the poor and if I find that I have unwittingly been involved in a scheme of extortion, I pay it back four times over! Do it all the time." (Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke: X-XXIV* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1983), 1220).

All this is to say that maybe this isn't Zacchaeus' conversion story. It's his proclamation story. Jesus declares that salvation has come to the house of Zacchaeus, and he, fully and completely and beautifully, is one of the children of Abraham, short stature, questionable business model, and all. The blemishes here include his short stature. We may hear this detail as some local color, but not particularly important. But lately, I'm not so sure. The reason is, I've been keeping company with the

writings of disability scholars this week, and I'm coming to believe that this is not just a bit of biblical trivia. I suspect that we may be seeing Zacchaeus as cute or comedic, but not as he would have been seen in his own time as having a physical blemish, a blemish that marked him as an other. But he's an other whom Jesus embraces, not in spite of his otherness but because of it. And I think that makes this story a conversion story for those watching this drama unfold, and perhaps for us too.

Zacchaeus was short in stature. Maybe this is a clue to our reading today. Zacchaeus was not only in a questionable line of work, but he stood out bodily. That is, then as now, there was this idea that God preferred symmetrical people, beautiful people, people of average or slightly above average height. In the Old Testament, Saul is described as being the most handsome man in Israel, head and shoulders above everyone else; David is ruddy with beautiful blue eyes; Rachel is graceful and lovely while her sister Leah has weak or dim eyes. In its description of the priests that can go into the temple to make sacrifices, Leviticus enumerates the different blemishes that would exclude a priest from entering the temple, including, being blind or lame, a mutilated face, a limb too long or too short, or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, or a hunchback, or a dwarf. . . . Or, we might add, a woman.

Zacchaeus wasn't a priest but the ideal of the human being would have impacted him. He might not have been afflicted by dwarfism as defined by medical science, but he may well have stood out as a blemished body. That makes me think we need to test some harmful perceptions which we have inherited, in part, from the bible. The Bible has, indeed, played a part in reinforcing negative ideas about people who live with disabilities. And Christian hymns have, too. We sing, "I was blind but now I see" — it may mean transformation, but without intending it, we often take it as *eliminative*, as in the experience of blindness is *eliminated* by norms of the sighted community. Commonplace turns of phrase betray our best intentions, when we say things like, "the blind leading the blind" or "that was a lame thing to say" — people with disabilities become the metaphor for what we don't approve of, which is a problem for us but something a verbal attack on their very existence. *They might say, Please, don't turn my human experience into a metaphor for the stupid things you say and do!* ("Editorial: The Bible and Disability" in *Interpretation*, vol. 73, no. 4 (October 2019), 359).

The implications of this are huge, according to Julia Watts Belser, a rabbinical scholar. She believes that our unexamined views of the body underwrite language and attitudes that give birth to physical and systemic violence. Why, after all, is it dangerous to walk while Black in America? Why do people of color feel the pressure to "pass" in a majority white culture? The predicament of Zacchaeus turns out to be more common than we might imagine. In her work, Belser says these are not uncommon experiences among people who live "outside" whatever culture has said is the ideal body:

I hear the stories of countless people who have learned to hide their limp, even though it costs them in pain; to wear the prosthesis, even if it's awkward or ungainly, because other people don't like the sight of a visibly different body. I hear the pressure to train your tongue away from speech distinctiveness, the expectation to veil the reality of your depression, your chronic pain, your illness without end. I hear the expectation that we disabled people [need to] tame our differences, that we [can] present only the most palatable version of ourselves for public view (Julia Watts Belser, "The Bible and Disability: Leviticus 21" in *Interpretation* (October 2019), 365).

She self-identifies as a person who has lived with a physical disability all of her life. She has read scripture with that in mind. There's no point in disputing the idea that the Bible, written by human beings, often, maybe always reflects our preoccupations. We project those onto God, onto ourselves, and onto our neighbors. She urges us to exercise a healthy suspicion over idealized claims of beauty or wholeness. As a woman and a rabbi, and as a person who lives with a disability, her very existence and her experience of God calls into question that strand of scripture and the culture that goes with it.

But, thankfully, she says we have options. To paraphrase Belser, regarding the so-called blemish, you could either imagine God as the status-obsessed editor of a not so inspiring fashion magazine, or you could see this God as a wild-eyed artist, who loves difference, who is delighted by it, who never saw a blemish that wasn't in some intrinsic way, beautiful. This option exists in the biblical narratives as well. Think of God creating human beings, lemurs and ocelots, starfish and gorillas, and the riot of God's peculiar sense of fun in diversity, in generativity becomes obvious. Both exist. Given these two options, we can make a choice: Do we go for the status-obsessed God, the not so inspiring editor of a fashion magazine? Or for the wild-eyed artist, who never saw a blemish she didn't love? "What," asks Belser, "is here for me, a person who lives with a disability that has marked me from my earliest childhood days? What illuminates the presence of the God I know, the God I love, and the God whose signature is written into my bones?" (Ibid., 360-1).

Using this as our backdrop, how might we read the story of Zacchaeus? How might God help us see our own circumstances, challenging us where we need to be challenged and confirming us where we need to hear confirmation? Well, right away, as we return to Luke, we might notice how active Zacchaeus is throughout this text. Zacchaeus seems to take the *dis* out of *disability*, and voila, we see ability. He initiates. He activates. He climbs a sycamore tree. That to me suggests that he is not able to climb a tree, which is something; he doesn't hide from Jesus or anyone else. He's past that. Zacchaeus runs ahead of where Jesus is going, which is less about a physical ability, and more about how he didn't care what people thought about him. Running was not something grown men were supposed to do; it was considered unbecoming. And Jesus knows his name, without ever having met him. It's almost as if they're old friends, delighted to be in each other's company again. Maybe in some ways, kindred spirits. Jesus meets us not as the super-hero savior but as a wounded healer. It's also significant that Jesus isn't merely ADA compliant, supplying equal access to divinity, which would be good. But Jesus *enters* Zacchaeus' life, becoming the shape of the so-called blemished one and, in that shape, he proclaims the ability in every so-called disability, the creature-beauty in every so-called blemish. And this too suggests God's way, God's preference: Jesus looks up to Zacchaeus. *He looks up to Zacchaeus*. Think of Danny DeVito: the lasting image of him is that he's craning his head upward, but in this text, Danny DeVito is looking down on Jesus and Jesus is looking up to him. Is that only a physical act or is that in some way admiration? Does Jesus delight in difference as generative, bold, and beautiful?

Jesus says that he "must" stay the night at Zacchaeus' house. Let's imagine that house, if we can. Low ceiling, even lower door jamb ("Watch your head!" says Zacchaeus, as Jesus follows behind, feet on earth, head in heaven). Most of us only get a taste of this kind of thing. But, maybe, if your first language isn't English, you may know what it's like, the freedom you feel when you're in your own home, speaking Urdu with people who love you. Nobody turns their heads at the strange sound of your voice, because it's not strange; it's home, it's language of table and hearth. It's how we, the so-called blind, read, and learn to weep, laugh, and think, in braille. It's how we speak, the so-called deaf, with sign of hand and heart.

It's the way Khalil, Leroy, Taetae, and Keyon sit in a boardroom, around a conference table, projection equipment and everyone with a bottle of water. That's how Dan Rodricks, a local columnist for *The Sun*, begins the story of the Korner Boyz Enterprises. It's like any other boardroom, he says, except that four of the people at the table are teenagers, three of them in hoodies. Kai Crosby-Singleton works with MICA. He saw the boys being targeted with racial slurs, abuse, at the corner of Mt. Royal and North Avenue. He started talking to them. Learned their names. Learned they have a code of conduct. He said, "Let me put that into writing for you." He noted their business model. "Any other line of work you might think of taking up?" he asked. They said, "Maybe get into another business, selling bottled water."

Our own Scot Spencer is part of this group, sitting with these teens in that boardroom. And it's interesting to me, the house they're in is, ostensibly, the house of business. But it feels a bit like the house of kids who have learned how to hustle, even when it was frowned on. In the eyes of the world, they are related to Zacchaeus. They are teaching Scot and others, while they give their time and talents to this group of entrepreneurs. There's a mutuality, a sense of reciprocity. Hustle, it turns out, is just another word for business, for initiative, for determination. Scot says they're learning from these young teens. "They're smart, creative kids," he says. The kids themselves speak of loyalty, empathy, and modeling something for others . . . and they're not going to be outlawed by fear, or by stigma. Some folks are embarrassed or afraid of the hustle of teenagers, the visible difference, the blemish of poverty.

Not Keyon, Khalil, Leroy, Taetae. They're standing straight . . . testifying, brash and audacious:

"By doing this," they say, "we might help other kids."

"This will make them see they can do something different."

"None would suspect kids [like us] from Baltimore could do something like this"

(Dan Rodricks, "Mentors Help Squeegee Boys" in *The Sun* (1 November 2019).

Maybe the Korner Boyz don't need conversion as much as the boardroom. Do you think that's a possibility? What other public spaces (political, religious, economic, cultural) in our life exclude the differences that make us beautiful and interesting and generative? And what are some of the signs of a community where we claim the so-called blemish as beautiful? Look around you . . . what do you see, who do you see? Look within yourself . . . who, while smiling, is calling your name?

Amen.