Kids' Moments

Have you ever been playing with other children and somebody says, "That's not fair!" What does that mean?

How does it feel if you're playing with other kids and you don't get a turn?

Do you think you should always get to go first?

So, is it fair if I get a turn and then you get a turn?

I think Jesus would say being fair is about being kind and doing what makes everybody feel a part.

Invitation to the Table

Last May, just weeks away from his high school graduation, Alvaro Velasquez, an international student from Guatemala was randomly picked up by ICE and never made it to his graduation. He was taken to a detention center in Texas, where he spent months alone, before agreeing to self-deport to Guatemala.

In September, Dr. Shawn Wightman, Superintendent of Roosevelt School District in New York, told New York City Eyewitness News that Alvaro's diploma and gown were still sitting in his office, and that the teen was frightened to go back to Guatemala.

The young man had come to the USA illegally, but petitioned the courts and was granted what's called deferred action, which allowed him to stay legally.

At his own expense, Wightman traveled to Texas to give the 18-year-old his diploma but was not allowed to see him. Refusing to give up, he took two plane rides (again, at his own expense) and a 5-and-a-half-hour car trip through the foothills of Guatemala, and was finally reunited with Velasquez and his family.

Now Alvaro Velasquez has his cap, gown, and diploma, and we have a graphic example of the variety of ways one can wash another's feet.

Our Communion Hymn is #411, *"For the Bread Which You Have Broken."*

Pastoral Prayer

God, our nation is on spiritual life support. Many of our leaders forsake morality and due process; their primary value is “might makes right,” and their primary goal is to hold onto power, ignoring the consequences to environment, to human rights, or to democracy.

Your servant, Ezekiel, watched you knit together a valley of dry bones and cover them with flesh and skin and breathe life into them. As we meditate on that metaphor, we look at our struggling churches and wonder if the bones of our churches will rise up to dance and sing songs of new creation in this dark time.

Lord, through Jesus you stride into our sickness, heartache, and death. You don’t shy away from the vulnerability and pain that often afflict us. You enter fully into human life, and in Jesus you offer us an example of faith—the kind of faith with which we can move through our tears and calm our fears.

We know you are here with us, because we remember the words of Jesus: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Come into our awareness, Lord. Be for us, resurrection and life. Show us the doors you have opened. Make a way when we thought there was no way. Raise us up like the dry bones and, even on your way to and through the cross, be for us resurrection and life. Our only hope. Amen.

LUKE 19:1-10 (NRSVUE) *He entered Jericho and was passing through it.* 2 *A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich.* 3 *He was trying to see who Jesus was, but could not account of the crowd, because he was short in stature.* 4 *So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way.* 5 *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."* 6 *So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.* 7 *All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner."* 8 *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."* 9 *Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham.* 10 *For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."*

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The Word of God for the people of God!

Zacchaeus: our assumed "short king" of Jericho. Of course there's this that I've shared before: verse 3, *"He was trying to see who Jesus was, but could not on account of the crowd, because he was short in stature."* Who was short of stature? Remember that little game? According to the rules of grammar—both English and Greek—a personal pronoun refers to the last-named antecedent which, in this case, is Jesus. So, from the perspective of grammar, it was Jesus who was short in stature.

We'd rather picture him tall and handsome—and white—like the children's Sunday School pictures; but Jesus is often associated with Isaiah's Servant Songs, and the fourth Servant Song describes the Servant of YHWH:

> *he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we see him,*
> *there is no beauty that we should desire him.*
> *…and we hid as it were our faces from him;*
> *he was despised, and we esteemed him not.* (53:2-3 KJV)

It doesn't change the Zacchaeus story one whit; but it's a harmless way to remind each other how we take some things for granted in our reading of Scripture. It's hard to clear the attic—to sweep away the mental cobwebs and rearrange the fragments of partially remembered childhood Sunday School lessons, and sermons and camp songs.

Fred Craddock used to say serious Bible study involves more than drawing our chairs in a circle and each one read a verse and say what it means to me.

There's another way we may misinterpret the story. As we usually tell it, Zacchaeus is a greedy tax collector and Jesus notices him and then Zacchaeus promises to change his ways. It's a bad-guy-turns-good type of story.

But Amy-Jill Levine[1] points out something I've been missing all these years. In the original Greek, when Zacchaeus says, *"I give half my possessions to the poor and if I've cheated anyone I repay them four times over,"* those verbs are present tense! Not, "I will

[1] Levine is Rabbi Stanley M. Kessler Distinguished Professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies at Hartford International University for Religion and Peace. Thanks to a favorite vlogger, Joseph Yoo, for pointing this out.

give," but "I give;" not "I will repay," but "I repay." Seven of the fourteen English versions I checked, including the NRSVUE we use every Sunday, have it in the future tense.

So, maybe Zacchaeus isn't promising to start being generous; maybe he already is. Luke doesn't say. Maybe Jesus isn't addressing Zacchaeus, but the crowd; people who've already decided who's in and who's out. Maybe what we can get out of the story today is a message to those who have rigidly decided who's in and who's out—who's right (which is always "us") and who's wrong (which is always anybody who disagrees with "us.")

In Jesus's time, the very architecture of the temple revealed in stone what Jesus was trying to reform: something all religions invariably do: create insiders and outsiders.

The temple was designed in concentric areas to distinguish degrees of worthiness, as religion so often does, the purpose of which is to declare my own worthiness by putting others down. In the center of the temple stood the Holy of Holies, which only the high priest could enter on one day a year. Next was the court of the priests and the Levites, which only they could enter. Then came the court for ritually pure Jewish men, and Jewish women had access only to the outermost court of the temple. Non-Jews were prohibited altogether. For them to enter was punishable by death.

Jews would not touch "gentiles"; some Catholics still speak of "non-Catholics." Evangelical and mainline Protestants look down on each other. Everybody seems to need some kind of sinner or heretic to compare against themselves so we don't look so bad. "At least I'm not as bad as he is!" So we create "meritocracies;" systems of worthiness based on some kind of holiness code that separates people by race, nation, sexuality, morality, culture religious faith... Much of Leviticus is a holiness code, and so is the compulsion of almost every Christian denomination since the Reformation.

Jesus was a radical reformer who showed no interest in purity systems or closed systems of any kind. They only appeal to the ego and lead no one to God. Jesus showed no interest in the various debt and purity codes of ancient Israel, which are religious forms of power and exclusion.[2]

So, maybe Jesus wasn't saving Zacchaeus so much as he was confronting the assumptions of the crowd. When he says, "*Today salvation has come to THIS house…*" whose house? Zacchaeus' house, or the house of Israel? He continues, "*…because he, too, is a son of Abraham.*" He's speaking in the third person, so he's not speaking to Zacchaeus, but to the crowd about Zacchaeus.

He was a publican, and so when we read the story, we make some assumptions based upon the reputation and prejudices surrounding tax collectors. But for Luke, the affirmation of Zacchaeus as a son of Abraham is called salvation. Zacchaeus belongs to the chosen people, despite the protests of those who would disqualify him.

[2] The previous three paragraphs are condensed and adapted from Richard Rohr in Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation: Jesus Did Not Play by the Rules - pastor.jim.fccc@gmail.com - Gmail

And that word, "today," matters. In Luke's Gospel, more than thirty times, Jesus preaches that the kingdom of God is a present reality (in Matthew's Gospel, thirty-five times, it's the kingdom of heaven, but it's here). So, Jesus isn't talking about a someday kind of salvation—getting your card punched for the afterlife. He's saying right here, right now, already, salvation is happening in this mess—in this house—in this heart, because today is when heaven crashes into earth; when Grace stops being an idea and starts being a way of life. Today is the day for generosity and reconciliation and justice and all those other qualities that happen when the kingdoms of this world become the kingdom of God, because Grace found you first. Today.

Now, read the story again:

LUKE 19:1-10 (NRSVUE) ***He entered Jericho and was passing through it.*** ***2*** ***A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich.*** ***3*** ***He was trying to see who Jesus was, but could not account of the crowd, because he was short in stature.*** ***4*** ***So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way.*** ***5*** ***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."*** ***6*** ***So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.*** ***7*** ***All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner."*** ***8*** ***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 pay back four times as much."*** ***9*** ***Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham.*** ***10*** ***For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."***

The message to the crowd and to us and all who hear it is to stop waiting for a someday kind of faith and start living a today kind of grace in which the way we treat people changes, the way we spend money changes, the way we use power changes, the way we offer mercy changes, because the kingdom of God doesn't start when we die, it starts when we let love outweigh everything else—today.

Pray with me: Gracious One, we sense the urgency of Jesus's words to Zacchaeus, words echoed in Paul's words to the Christians in Corinth: *"... now is the acceptable time; look, now is the day of salvation!"* (II CORINTHIANS 6:2) In these words we hear your call to immediate response to your gracious presence. Break us, melt us, mold us, use us today. Amen.