

"Risking Redemption"

a Sermon Delivered by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, Senior Minister
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If I told you that there are a few words so powerful that all you have to do is say them, and really believe them, and you can be saved...*redeemed*... don't you think that most people would do it? If saying a few words could make such a huge difference in the quality of your life? What if I could show you that saying these words with conviction would:

- help your marriage,
- further your career,
- improve your relationship with your children
- and cause you to become a better friend...

do you think you'd say them? But let's be clear, sometimes the distance between our mind (and what we think) and our mouth (and what we say) can be the longest distance on earth. One of my favorite Far Side cartoon shows Tarzan swinging through the trees. Apparently, he's on his way to meet Jane, his new love interest, for the first time. And in each panel, as he's swinging from tree to tree, we can see in the thought bubbles that he's rehearsing in his head what he's going to say when he finally reaches her. Clearly he wants to make a good impression on her, so he's practicing. "How do you do? My name is Tarzan, and I believe you are known as Jane." Then he tries, "Allow me to introduce myself, I am Tarzan, Lord of the Jungle... and you?" Next he tries, "You must be Jane... I am Tarzan. It's a pleasure to meet you." In the last panel he finally arrives at the big moment and he looks into her eyes & says, "Me Tarzan, you Jane." And we see him going, "Doh!"

The distance between our brain and our lips (and between our heart and our lips) can sometimes be a long way. Today I want to talk about some words that anyone can pronounce, but that many people struggle to say. But first let's look at the story of Zacchaeus from the Christian Bible (Luke 19). We're told that Zacchaeus is short in stature (the word stature is translated from the Greek word *helikía*, which can also be translated as maturity or character.) In other words, Zacchaeus is short on maturity and character. He was a Jew, but he was also the chief tax collector for the Romans, and he was known for entering people's homes and taxing them on their property, and sending the money to support the Roman Empire, who were the enemies and occupiers of the Jews. And he would always inflate the numbers and take the extra money for himself. That's how tax collectors in those days were paid.

The Bible says he was rich. To understand what being a tax collector in those days would be like today, imagine if Al Qaida and Osama Bin Laden were to successfully take over and occupy the United States. And someone (an American) went to work for Al Qaida, and they were given a machine gun and a small group of armed fighters, and they went from house to house in your neighborhood and entered, at will, with our guns and extorted money from you to support Osama and his occupying government, while also taking a big chunk for themselves. Anyone who would take that job might become very rich, but would be hated by everyone as a selfish, unethical, traitor.

Well, that was Zacchaeus.

Now, word had spread that this Jew named Jesus was coming into town, and it was said that he could teach, and heal, and spin a great story. In other words, in the ancient near east, Jesus was a rock star. He was bigger than Lady Gaga, the Black Eyed Peas, and Alicia Keyes all rolled together. So the crowds gathered like at a festival or a parade, to await his arrival. Zacchaeus wanted to see him, but since he was so “short of stature,” he couldn’t see over all the people, so he climbed up a sycamore tree. When Jesus and his entourage made their way into the town, Jesus saw Zacchaeus in the tree and said, “Zacchaeus come down, I’m coming to be a guest in your home this evening.”

As you can imagine, the people were appalled. Of all those living in Jericho, why would Jesus want to dine with that scoundrel? Some of the people probably thought Jesus was just one more money-grabbing preacher who cozies up to the big donors, regardless of their principles or unethical behaviors. Notice the contrast, Zacchaeus enters people’s homes with greed and power and selfishness, to cheat and rob people for his own benefit. But Jesus enters Zacchaeus’ home with love and acceptance. And because of this, Zacchaeus realizes that love and acceptance are what really make him happy, much more than money and power, and so he changes his ways. He was lost in selfishness, but now he’s found in love and acceptance. When he was born he was given the name Zacchaeus, which means pure or innocent – from the Hebrew Za-Ka-E. Like all of us, he was born pure and innocent. But through the course of growing up, he made decisions that debased his name and the sacredness of his life and its potential.

It reminds me of something that came up in the class I’m teaching on Wednesday nights this semester called *Race on the Silver Screen*. Last month we watched and discussed the movie *American Violet*. The movie is based on a true story that occurred in Hearne, TX about ten years ago. The DA was corrupt and racist, and he was arresting and convicting African Americans at alarming rates, and often doing it with trumped up drug charges against innocent people. In the story there’s a

white Texas lawyer named Sam Conroy who lives in the town where this was happening, and he's asked to help the ACLU sue the DA. Conroy knows that if he says yes, he'll lose a lot of friends and he'll lose his prestige and stature among the establishment in the community. Conroy was a former narcotics officer; he knew the police involved and the DA personally. But something inside Sam Conroy compelled him to take the case, even though he knew winning was a long shot and it would most likely cost him his friends, his reputation, and potentially even his law practice.

There's a scene where he's explaining why he decides to do it. He tells a story of when he was working at a public pool as a teenager in Texas, and it was at the time that African Americans were first being given the equal rights of access to public pools, bathrooms, lunch counters, libraries, and so on. He explains that one day it was closing time, he was mopping the men's locker room and there was a black gentleman in one of the showers, and two black youth still swimming in the pool. Suddenly a man, who he knew well, walked into the locker-room with a crow bar, and he told Conroy to leave. He said, "I can't leave, Tom, I need to finish mopping." The man said, "Leave." And Sam said he couldn't, that he needed to finish his work and lock up. That's when the man took the crow bar up to Sam's face and said, "You get out of here right now Sam – go!" And as Conroy was running out of there, a crowd of white men from the town were coming in carrying bats, shovels, broom handles and more. And Conroy could hear the screaming as he ran home.

The man in the shower died that night. And a few days later, an investigator from the FBI came to his home and asked what he saw. He could've named every one of those men, but he chose to remain silent. He figured, he still had to grow up in that town, and he was better off keeping quiet. But like Zacchaeus, he knew what he did was wrong and he had to live with that.

So, when the ACLU lawyer asked him to join the team, he knew that the narcotics task force and the DA were engaging in racial motivated drug sweeps, and that it was one of the ways that the DA could keep winning elections. Conroy knew that people's lives were being ruined, for no other reason than being poor and black. And Conroy knew that the only reason not to take the case was that he had to live and work in that town, and he would lose friends, and reputation, and probably money if he did it. It was one of those moments of truth in life when a person has to decide.

When he was fourteen, he was put in a terrible situation, and he made a convenient and unethical choice to lie to protect himself. That afternoon as a teenager, his integrity was seriously damaged. In fact, he gave a big piece of it away. And now he was an adult, and he was being asked to make a similar choice. This time he chose to do the right thing – no matter the cost. Up until that point, he was a big man in that community, but small in character. But he chose to risk his large stature (in the

town) to grow his character and integrity. And like Zacchaeus, in doing it he reclaimed the true meaning and promise of his life. He became the man he was meant to be, and he realized that what made his life truly satisfying and meaningful was not his status in the community, but his integrity.

That's redemption.

And you have your stories and I have mine, of the things we've done that caused us to leave a piece of our integrity behind. And the story of Zacchaeus gives us a map for how to find what we've lost. When we try to think of who are the Zacchaeus' in our world today, it's easy to point to Hosni Mubarak and Muammar Gaddafi, right? They've robbed their own people in order to gain wealth and power. But you and I have our own need to seek forgiveness, if not outright redemption. So let's see what Zacchaeus and Jesus can teach us.

Zacchaeus came out of his house and addressed the large crowd who had gathered. He said, "I'm sorry! I've been cheating you for years. You know it and so do I. I feel awful and ashamed. I've gotten rich at your expense. I apologize. To make it right, I'll repay each one of you from whom I've stolen. In fact, I'll repay you back four times the amount I cheated you. And, today, I'm giving half of my goods to the poor of our city."

It sounds kind of like a Hollywood ending. But the reason it's in the Bible is that it's a teaching story. For one thing it shows us how to apologize.

Remember I said at the start that there are a few words that can be hard to say, but if we do they can save us. Two of those words are "I'm sorry." Those can be life changing, relationship saving, job advancing words. Let's look closely, because there are three parts to an effective apology, and Zacchaeus does them all. It starts with saying the simple but demanding words, "I'm sorry." But that alone is not enough. A good and effective apology also expresses how we feel about what we've done. "I'm really embarrassed that I did this," or, "I'm really disappointed in myself and feel bad that I hurt you." However we feel as long as it's honest. And then, to complete a full apology requires us to offer or ask with sincerity, "What can I do to make this right?"

Many of us were not taught how to give an appropriate apology. There are three parts: saying "I'm sorry," expressing sincere remorse ("I'm embarrassed about what I did"), and finally, offering to make it right.

You can probably tell that I know something about this subject. I've had lots of practice, learning how to say I'm sorry. But I'd argue that there is also a more important lesson here. Because we should strive not only to follow the example of Zacchaeus, but the example of Jesus.

What did Jesus do? He loved and accepted Zacchaeus, and it was his love that ultimately saved him. The irony is that so often we withhold our love from people when we don't like the things they do. From our children – especially when they're teenagers and acting rebellious – we can be tempted to withhold our love. From our spouses or partners, when some of their actions start to grate on us, we withhold. From people at work we find inept, or incompetent, or annoying. From our adult children who may make choices that frustrate us or break our hearts. And sometimes we even withhold our love from ourselves, when we can't forgive ourselves for doing something we feel is inept, or mean, or less than what we expect.

This story that we're teaching our children this month has a lot to teach us. Even when Zacchaeus was at his most corrupted, selfish, sinful worst, Jesus still loved him. And in feeling and experiencing that love, he was transformed. The story says that even when you are at your worst, God still loves you – you are still lovable. No matter what we've done in the past, as long as we have breath, we are capable of being renewed and redeemed. And we can even be a source of others' salvation by doing as Jesus has done, and that is not withholding our love, but using it to heal and inspire and save.

Let's practice saying the most powerful words anyone can say. It helps to practice. Repeat after me:

I'm sorry...

I love you...

Amen.