

**“CHANGED!”**

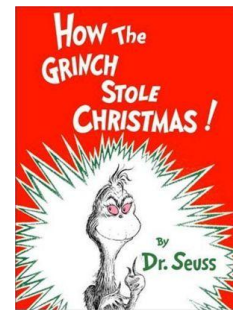
Luke 19:1-10

July 25, 2010

Who among us has not heard or sung the Sunday School classic song “Zacchaeus?” I’ll bet we could sing it together:

Zacchaeus was a wee little man and a wee little man was he  
 He climbed up in a sycamore tree for the Lord he wanted to see  
 And as the Savior passed that way he looked up in that tree  
 And he said, “Zaccheaus, you come down!”  
 For I’m going to your house today, for I’m going to your house today.

I don’t know about you, but I’ve always grown up giving Zacchaeus a bad rap. One of the hardest to love people in all of the gospels, it seems, is Zacchaeus. Now we don’t know all that much about Zach, but scripture tells us a couple of things: number one, he was a tax collector. And in the Bible, tax collectors are a bad lot.



We really only hear about two people with this vocation in the Bible, Zacchaeus and Matthew, but these two seem to carry the guilt of all who claim the same vocation. Tax collectors were thought to be greedy people, often taking more than what was owed and keeping the extra for themselves. But the reality is that they were just doing their job, and perhaps people resented them for the same reason we resent tax collectors today – because we don’t always agree with the government on how or why we are taxed.

Another thing we learn is that Zach was the “chief” tax collector. This would mean that he had contracted for the right to collect revenues in the district, the district here being Jericho, a main trade route and an important customs center. And, whether it was because he was very good at his job or very dishonest, he was rich.

The other thing we know for certain about Zach is that he was a little guy – “short in stature” as scripture says. He was so short, in fact, that when Jesus came to town Zacchaeus climbed a tree to see over the heads of the others who had clamored to see the Master.

Zacchaeus, it seems, managed to make an enemy of just about everyone. Sometimes I wonder whether people didn’t like him because he was mean spirited, or whether he was mean spirited because people didn’t like him. Perhaps it was a little...or a lot...of both.

If we think hard enough, we can all likely come up with a person in our lives who is like Zaccheaus. And we don’t have to look very far in the stories of Dr. Seuss to find a character that resembles Zacchaeus – that would be the Grinch.

The Grinch is a most unusual character. While we want to hiss and boo him for his actions, we also want to wrap our arms around him and give him a tight squeeze because we feel sorry for him.

His story is immortalized in the Dr. Seuss classic *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* – the book, the animated holiday classic, and more recently, a full-length feature film starring Jim Carrey.

The story of the Grinch reinforces the Gospel message on a number of different levels. I want to look at three lessons that we can learn from the Grinch that teach us not just something about others, but something about ourselves.

The Grinch is a miserable fellow. When some look at a glass and label it either half full or half empty, the Grinch would likely say it didn't matter because the water was probably contaminated. In other words, the Grinch goes beyond simple pessimism – he is a completely negative person.

Our natural reaction when we encounter such a person is to wonder why. What is going on in this person's life? Who set them off? What did I do to make this person angry at me? In the case of the Grinch, no one seems to know. Dr. Seuss writes:

*It could be his head wasn't screwed on just right,  
It could be, perhaps, that his shoes were too tight.  
But I think that the most likely reason of all  
May have been that his heart was two sizes too small.*

If we could identify one thing from the story that makes the Grinch the most unhappy, the most angry, the most miserable, it would be this – other people's happiness. The Grinch seems somewhat content in his own misery until he witnesses others who don't share in his misery. His 'solution' (if you can call it that) is to create unhappiness for others. "Misery loves company" as the old saying goes, and the Grinch wants some company!

Scriptures like 1 Thessalonians 5:11 remind us to "encourage one another and build up each other." Are we doing that as individuals? Are we doing that as a church? Or, as Christians, have we fallen into Grinch-like behavior, dragging others down because we're feeling down? Lesson one from the Grinch: We can't pull ourselves up by dragging other people down.

Lesson two focuses on how the Grinch became so "grinchy" to begin with. We don't get this information from the book or the original animated classic, but the Hollywood version does make an attempt to help us understand. In the movie, we see the Grinch as a child. He is very unpopular – we could even call him an outcast. Day after day he is picked on mercilessly until finally he runs away and creates a new lifestyle for himself – a lifestyle of bitterness and resentment.

We know the Grinch, don't we? There is at least one person in our lives whose ways mirror those of the Grinch. And so we know how hard it can be to love people like that...but that's exactly what we're called to do.

For Zacchaeus, that person was Jesus. Instead of further ridiculing him, Jesus showed him respect. Instead of labeling him a sinner as others had done, Jesus loved him – he invited himself to stay at the house of Zacchaeus. And just look at what that did for Zacchaeus – it not only made his day, it changed his entire life! This expression of love and respect was enough to overcome all the pain that Zacchaeus had endured up to that point. He became a new person – transformed! He went from feeling unloved to learning to love; from hurting other people to helping them.

Lesson number two involves recognizing and loving people who, like the Grinch, are miserable and difficult to love because they are in such pain. In the midst of their pain, they find it hard to think about anyone else but themselves. If we can show love to these hard-to-love people, perhaps they, like Zacchaeus, will be transformed.

The third lesson from the Grinch is perhaps the most important one. It is the message that people *can* change.

The Grinch had stolen Christmas from the Whos in Whoville. He deserved punishment. What he received instead was a healthy dose of grace. And that gift of grace brought about in the Grinch a realization in the very depths of his soul that he was someone or something special. And when the Grinch realized that he was something special, he had a change of heart. Dr. Seuss writes:

And what happened then...?  
Well...in Who-ville they say  
That the Grinch's small heart  
Grew three sizes that day!

We see a similar transformation in Zacchaeus. When Jesus identified Zacchaeus as someone special – as someone in whose house he wanted to dwell that night – Zacchaeus had a change of heart. He said, “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.” To which Jesus responded, “Today salvation has come to this house.” Salvation – the kingdom of God - came in Jesus' message...and perhaps even more so in Zacchaeus' response. I have no doubt that his encounter with Jesus changed Zacchaeus forever.

Let us remember that that we cannot raise ourselves up by dragging others down. Let us remember that even the hard-to-love deserve our love. And may we remember that people can change. Thank you Dr. Seuss and The Grinch, thank you Zacchaeus, and thank you Jesus for teaching us these important life lessons. AMEN.