

Jesus' Response To 'Othering' from Luke 19

When Jesus passed the tree, he looked up and saw Zacchaeus. Able to read the hearts of people, Jesus did not see a jolly fellow tangled in sycamore branches. He saw Zacchaeus, a collaborator and an agent of the Roman overlords. And what did he say? “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down! ... For I must stay at your house today” [Luke 19:5]. Jesus called him down, ordering him to stand as equals with him on the ground, and then invited himself to dinner.

Bass describes how Jesus' actions upset ancient societal expectations of who could offer a “gift”:

According to Luke, Zacchaeus “hurried down and was happy to welcome him” (Luke 19:6). But the crowds watching this encounter were shocked and angry. Jesus was a lower-status person, and a good Jew. Lower-status people never invited their superiors to a meal.... In normal circumstances, Zacchaeus should have invited Jesus to his home. Once Jesus accepted Zacchaeus's hospitality, then Jesus would owe Zacchaeus his gratitude, an obligation to repay the favor that had been extended to him. That, however, would have undermined Jesus's spiritual authority with the crowds who followed him. They would have wanted Jesus to reject such an overture.

But Jesus undermined this whole gratitude business by inviting himself to Zacchaeus's house. Jesus offered the gift of his presence to one who did not deserve it. This made Zacchaeus not a benefactor, but a beneficiary of a gift. Technically, Zacchaeus now owed Jesus something. Out of his sense of gratitude, Zacchaeus promised to give away half of his wealth to the poor and pay back all those whom he defrauded four times as much as he skimmed. Ultimately, it would have been impossible to give back this much money. Zacchaeus promised to bankrupt himself. In effect, he resigned his position. There is no way Zacchaeus could have remained a tax collector. He got out of the tree—extricating himself from the Roman hierarchical structure of debt and duty. In response, Jesus proclaimed: “Today salvation”—healing and wholeness—“has come to this house!” (Luke 19:9)....

Jesus opened the door for Zacchaeus to “come down” from his old life, to stop participating in a corrupt system of gratitude that oppressed his own people. In a moment, Jesus turned his world upside down: Who was the guest and who was the host?... Jesus imagined a place where oppressed and oppressor leave their “stations” and meet as friends, where forgiveness is practiced and gratitude expresses itself not in debt payment but in passing on generous gifts to others....

[Jesus] established a table of hospitality where all are guests and no one owes anything to anyone else. Around this table, gifts pass without regard to payback or debt. Everyone sits. Everyone eats. And, recognizing that everything is a gift, all are grateful.