

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
**Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor**  
**“Do You See Me?”**  
**Luke 18:35-19:10**  
**24<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost**  
**October 30, 2016**

Today’s Scripture lesson consist of two stories told back to back by the gospel writer Luke. The first is the story of Jesus’s healing of a blind man. The second is the children’s Sunday School favorite: the story of Zacchaeus (who was “a wee little man, a wee little man was he.”)

Let me call to your attention a couple of interpretive notes before I proceed to reading the Scripture.

First, notice how many references there are to the sense of sight, how often the words *sight*, *see*, and *saw*, appear in each of the two stories.

Second, if you are reading along in the NRSV, you will note that I am changing the verb tense in the Zacchaeus story from future tense to present tense. Luke’s Greek is in the present tense, and that is what that old-timey King James Version uses. The more contemporary New Revised Standard and New International Versions give a future cast to the verb. I will say more about this in the sermon, but for now, I just want you to know that it is a conscious choice on my part to go with the present, rather than the future, tense.

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On Thursday evening, I had the pleasure and privilege of being inspired by the artist Jordan Casteel. In a talk which she presented at our shared alma mater Agnes Scott College, a talk which was not about either of these two Lukan stories, she nevertheless blessed me with an evocative lens through which to interpret the power of Christ which pulses urgently from the paired stories of Jesus’s “seeing” the blind man and Zacchaeus.

Here is a part of Jordan’s personal story.

Jordan came to Agnes Scott deeply committed to social justice. She declared her major as sociology. (It’s one of those majors that is a great foundation for just about any career that you can think of....including being a minister!) Jordan went to Cortona, Italy, during her junior year. She took her first oil painting class, and, as she put it, she fell in love. She added studio art to her major.

Jordan had always been a keen observer of people and images and an advocate for social justice, but as she pursued her passion for oil painting, her vision was sharpened. And after graduate school at Yale, she moved to Harlem, and there, on the streets of Harlem, she found the narrative point for her art: black men. She said: these men are my brothers, one of whom is my twin, my father, my friends. I came to understand that the world doesn’t see them the way that I see and know them in my

intimate relationships with them. And so I photographed them. And I painted them. And I hoped that my painting would give other people access to the intimacy that I felt with these men.

Jordan became emotional as she shared one particular experience. At one of her shows at the Studio Museum in Harlem where she was serving as 2015-16 artist-in-residence, one of her models, a man who sold trinkets at a sidewalk table, showed up. He stood in front of the portrait (it's huge – 56 x 72) and just stared. Then he said to Jordan, "I've got to bring my wife back to see this." When his wife saw the painting, this is what she said to Jordan: "thank you for seeing him as I have always seen him."

Jordan reflected upon the reality that many of her subjects whom she photographs and paints don't feel welcomed in spaces like museums and galleries, but she said, "in that moment, he felt welcomed. He felt seen here. And I realized that I had created a family for myself in a way that I could not have foreseen." (1)

To be welcomed. To be seen. To be a part of a family that one could never create for oneself. All through the grace of Jesus Christ. This, my brothers and sisters, is the truth that is embedded in these parallel stories that are today's Scripture lesson.

Let's look at each of the two stories in turn.

Did you catch how the world regarded the blind man? Luke says that the blind man was sitting by the roadside. The crowd was going by. Even Jesus was passing by. The man was, well, invisible, for all intents and purposes.

But Jesus stood still, Luke say.

What do you want?

I want to see.

Receive your sight, Jesus said.

Immediately, he regained his sight.

In these three statements, do you feel the action building to a climax?

And what exactly is the climax of the story?

The climax of the story, the miracle, if you will, is this: all the people, when they saw it, praised God.

In other words, "Thank you, Jesus, for seeing this man the way that we have never seen him."

And as for Zacchaeus, in his story, as in the story of Zacchaeus, there is an emphasis upon sight. And while Luke says that Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus, there is the implicit sense that he is longing to be seen. He is hoping beyond hope that there is someone, someone in all the world, who can see *him* not the way that the world sees him, but as he really is.

The way that we most often read the story is to view Zacchaeus's "salvation" as residing in his future action of giving away half of his possessions to the poor and paying back those he cheated by returning to them four times as much money as he had stolen from them. This is a legitimate way to read the text. I have preached the text that way myself, especially when the lectionary handed it to me on a silver platter on stewardship dedication Sunday. Reading the text this way creates a nice flow of action and tacit theological logic- Jesus honors Zacchaeus which prompts his changed behavior which Jesus then acknowledges. (2)

For all its logic, however, I have become convinced that there is another, equally valid, way to read the story.

When the tense of the verbs is changed, we see that Zacchaeus is saying that he is already giving half of his possessions to the poor and repaying those who were cheated four times what they were owed. And did you notice that in the story Zacchaeus neither confesses his sin nor repents? Did you observe that Jesus doesn't commend Zacchaeus's penitence or his faith or his change of heart. He merely pronounces blessing, blessing based not on anything Zacchaeus has done but simply because he is. (3) Jesus refuses to be bound by any labels that the world would put on a person. Where the crowd, the world, sees a bad dude, Jesus sees a child of God. Where the crowd, the world, sees an outsider, Jesus sees a member of the family. Where the crowd, the world, sees lost, Jesus sees found. (4)

And this, my brothers and sisters, is good news for every single one of us.

Because who among us doesn't long to simply be seen and known and loved and blessed, not only in spite of who we are, but also because of who we are? Who among us doesn't long to look with awe at a magnificent, bigger than life portrait of ourselves and say, "Wow. Just wow. That is the person you see in me?"

We may not hear Jesus speaking to us directly as the blind man and Zacchaeus did. We may not have our portraits painted by Jordan Casteel. But we have these two stories from the pen of Luke. And through them we hear God's word to us: I SEE you. I see YOU. I see you as you are and as you will become as you grow in knowing what it means to be members of my family, brothers and sisters to one another.

There is one last thing.

Having read the story of the blind man and how the crowd praised God when the blind man was healed, we might expect that that the climax of Zacchaeus's story would be that the crowd, having seen Jesus call Zacchaeus by name and name him as a child of Abraham, thus bringing him into the circle of God's love, would, as they did in the earlier story, praise God.

But, of course, they don't. They grumble.

And that is sad. It is just sad.

But it didn't have to be that way, you know. And maybe in this political season, when there is a whole lot of grumbling in the atmosphere, when there are a lot of labels that we are pasting on each other and relating to each other as if these labels were the whole truth about who we are, it is a good

thing to remember that the better climax for our stories, the climax of our stories that God desires for us, is not grumbling, but blessing.

1. [www.jordancasteel.com](http://www.jordancasteel.com); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=otSEC5UDSvw>
2. David Lose, "Commentary on Luke 19: 1-10," [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org), October 30, 2016.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Audrey West, "House Calls," *Christian Century*, October 16, 2007, 23.