

“Chief of sinners though I be, Jesus shed his blood for me.” I feel I have known this song for as long as I can remember knowing any hymn — with the likely exception of some Christmas carols, I suppose. I don’t know why I feel that way, maybe it’s just because growing up as a Missouri Synod Lutheran, it’s as though these words have always been a part of me. It’s not an easy thing to be forced to admit that I am “chief of sinners.” I know I would much rather feel that I’m a pretty good person, that at least I’m not as bad as “those people.” But this song doesn’t allow me to buy into that kind of Lake Wobegon thinking, “where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average.”

The hymn just lays it out there for all to hear; and not just once, mind you, but to be true to the hymn, I have to sing it again in verse four, “Chief of sinners though I be, Christ is all in all to me.” Well, I’m not going to get overly psychoanalytical with you today, but I do feel it’s something to think about, whether we can admit that indeed, we are among those who are chief of sinners. Looking now as we will at today’s story from Luke, I hope you will be able to understand why I think it matters.

This episode of our story begins with Jesus pulling aside his main followers, the twelve. He reminds them again what they are doing and where they are heading. Just a few verses earlier from the place where we picked up the story, there is confusion about who’s going to be saved and who will not. So to back up a moment, Luke had just recorded an encounter that Jesus had with a rich ruler. Jesus told him, “Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” At this, we are told, the man became sad; for he was very rich. Jesus then told those who were gathered, “How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” This teaching did not mesh with the disciples’ (and most people’s) thoughts about how the rich are rich because of their righteousness — so they were left confused. A bit later, when Peter brags of how he and the others have left their homes to follow Jesus, the response comes, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or

wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.”

So, quite likely the disciples were caught up in their own thoughts about what all they were going to gain for their sacrifice. You can imagine how these ordinary, working class men may have heard in those words the promise of treasure — you mean we are going to be greatly rewarded, Jesus? And that’s where today’s story begins, with the starry-eyed disciples being pulled aside by Jesus. ‘Now, see here, guys, this ain’t no pleasure cruise we are on. I’ve told you this before and I’m going to tell you again, “we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be handed over to the Gentiles; and he will be mocked and insulted and spat upon. After they have flogged him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise again.” Notice Jesus begins this telling with the word, “See.” “But,” we are told, “they understood *nothing* about all these things; in fact, what he said was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said.” We might rightly ask the question, ‘How can they possibly see what is hidden from them?’ We may think it isn’t entirely fair... until we go on to the next part of today’s episode from Luke.

In this next part, you might know that if Jesus and the disciples are approaching Jericho, they are not so far off from Jerusalem. Galilee is well north, and Samaria too is now in the rear view mirror. The close proximity to Jerusalem should serve to heighten our attention to what happens next. And what do we encounter but a blind man, sitting by the roadside begging. What he is doing out there, why he is not in the city proper, one can only guess. But he is shrewd enough that when he hears a crowd going by, he inquires as to what’s going on. Someone says, “Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.” And, at this, the one who is blind “sees” much more than anyone else because he calls out, shouting, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” He recognizes Jesus for who he is, the Son of David, a title that is akin to calling Jesus the Messiah, God’s Anointed One. And Luke explains how “those who were in front,” the ones who we would expect to have the best chance to see, because nothing is blocking their view, are missing what is right in

front of their noses. They fail to see Jesus for who he is and instead, they sternly order this blind man to be quiet. But this is actually a remarkable instance of the “blind leading the blind.” Because the blind man shouts even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” I love how it is the blind man who is trying to lead everyone to see Jesus!

Well, apparently, his shouting worked because Jesus stops, stands still, and orders the man to be brought to him. And when he came near, he asked him, “What do you want me to do for you?” He says, “Lord, let me see again.” Again, this blind man is remarkable to me. Full of insight and knowing what he wants, he gains his physical sight. Jesus declares that it is the man’s faith that has saved him, or made him well. Can those who have their sight realize who is the one to give insight? Don’t get stuck looking backward where God has been. You want to see where God is active in the world today, look to Jesus and God’s continuing activity — it may be in the Christian community or it just may be outside it, on the margins. When this man, a beggar, in contrast to the rich ruler in the previous story, regains his sight, he not only follows Jesus but he glorifies God and in doing so, all the people, when they see it, they praise God along with him.

So now, we have heard about those who *can* see acting blind to what God is up to insofar as Jesus need to go to Jerusalem; and then we have the blind man seeing more than everyone else. Now how does Zacchaeus fit into this sequence? We hear that Jesus enters Jericho and is passing through it. We are introduced to someone who is given an unusual name and title, Zacchaeus is a chief tax collector. He is a Jew, but because of his role as a chief tax collector he was likely an overseer in charge of the collection of a variety of tolls, and therefore all the more despised by most everyone. Zacchaeus was rich and, again, if we have been following what Jesus has been teaching, remember(?), the rich are *not* rich because of their righteousness.

But we quickly get from Luke that there’s something different about this rich man because we are told, “he was trying to see who Jesus was.” And then we are given some reasons why he could not, it was both on account of the crowd, and because he was short in stature. This shortness of Zacchaeus is not only a comment on his physical

height however, it also implies his place in the community. But surprisingly, Zacchaeus is not above stooping to some unconventional means just to catch a glimpse of Jesus as he goes by. We are told, "He ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see Jesus." Yet, as we learn, it was not necessary for Zacchaeus to elevate himself, for Jesus knows who he is and calls out his name. This tells us that Jesus was already on the search for him. Jesus comes to the place and without even having to inquire who this guy is up a tree, he says, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay in your house today." Today. Now. In the present. A present encounter with Jesus reveals God's kingdom come, not in the future but today, now. In just moments, that word "today" will be echoed and it will also be echoed in Jesus beautiful words uttered from the cross. In that instance, to a fellow "chief of sinners" when Jesus assures him, "Today, you will be with me in paradise." Zacchaeus was no dummy, when he heard Jesus, "he hurried down and was happy to welcome him." Or, it could be translated, "he received him joyfully." Alas, Luke does not fail to let us know what everyone else has to say, they "began to grumble and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.'" Zacchaeus, without any prompting by Jesus, stood there and says essentially, "See, I want to set things right. I want to change my ways. I repent of what I have done and I'm going to give half of everything away to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I want to try to make amends by doing far more than what is required of me. I will pay them back four times as much."

Jesus says to Zacchaeus and to all those who are standing around grumbling in their blindness to what God is up to, "Guess what, y'all. *Today* salvation has come to this house. And you know why? Because here is a child of Abraham that God loves and this man has an appreciation of God's love. He was lost, but he has been found. Chief of sinners though he was, it is for the likes of him that I am on my way to Jerusalem to redeem." So you have a choice: Stay and grumble about others, with others? Or, admit you are among those who are a chief of sinners and continue to follow Jesus? I pray that you hear Jesus calling you by name, for he wants to stay in your house today. Amen