

*The Folly of Assumptions*  
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

*[Jesus] entered Jericho and was passing through it. <sup>2</sup>A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. <sup>3</sup>He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. <sup>4</sup>So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. <sup>5</sup>When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” <sup>6</sup>So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. <sup>7</sup>All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” <sup>8</sup>Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “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.” <sup>9</sup>Then Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. <sup>10</sup>For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”*

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It seems safe to say that old Zacchaeus was an unpopular guy. Apparently, he was short, rich, and a chief tax collector. As we noted last week, tax collectors in Roman occupied Israel were not thought of very highly. They were seen as traitors to their own people, cooperators with the hated Romans, and cheats who overcharged in order to line their own pockets. And that’s exactly what they thought of Zacchaeus. Were they wrong? Well, that depends on how you read the text.

Typically, the story of Zacchaeus has been read as a story of radical

conversion and salvation, marked by a newfound social conscience. After talking with Jesus, the previously corrupt and unpopular Zacchaeus says, “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.” He was a repentant miser.

The truth is, though, the present-tense Greek verbs in this text could be translated another way. It could just as easily be read, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, it is my habit to give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, my habit is to pay back four times as much.” It is equally likely that the story of Zacchaeus is about restoring to community a generous man, ostracized because of his profession, as it is about the repentance.<sup>1</sup>

This morning, I invite us to consider the possibility that Zacchaeus was a genuinely good and generous man, prior to his encounter with Jesus, who reminds the crowd that he’s as much a child of Abraham as they are. In fact, far from being the perpetrator he’s usually painted as, I’m willing to bet that Zacchaeus was actually the victim. The victim of what, you may ask. The victim of judgement.

Last week, as you’ll remember, we heard Luke’s Jesus tell the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector praying at the Temple—a story about judgement. We heard about the dangers of judging and the importance of grace. After the service, several of you mentioned to me that you appreciated the sermon, but wondered if it’s really possible not to judge. Zacchaeus’ story today gives us a chance to revisit this question.

While we do indeed make judgements, sometimes a very necessary thing, we can be intentional about not making a particular kind of judgement—the assumption. An assumption is something we believe to be true, but have not confirmed. In the case of poor Zacchaeus, even the translators of our Bibles made the assumption that since he was a tax collector, he

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<sup>1</sup> Commentary by Joel B. Green from “The New Interpreter’s Study Bible,” Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003.

must've been a slimy guy, which is why they translated the text as they did. We all make assumptions, don't we, but as the old adage goes: when you assume, you make an ASS out of U and ME.

In his bestselling book, *The Four Agreements*, author Don Miguel Ruiz warns:

The problem with making assumptions is that we believe they are the truth! We invent a whole story that's only truth for us, but we believe it. One assumption leads to another assumption; we jump to conclusions, and we take our story very personally...We make assumptions, we believe we are right about our assumptions, and then we defend our assumptions...<sup>2</sup>

Try and think about a time that you made an assumption about another person that turned out to be entirely false... I know I've done this before. In fact, while at my very first congregation, I was talking with a clearly pregnant woman during fellowship time after the service. At one point in the conversation, I asked her when the baby was due. The pleasant look on her face turned to bewilderment and she responded that she was not pregnant. Needless to say, that conversation didn't last much longer. To this day, I never ask a woman, no matter how pregnant she appears, about her baby unless she first confirms a pregnancy!

Assumptions are a form of judgement that we can intentionally work to avoid and doing so can save us from appearing like the proverbial ass. I'll never forget my sister telling me about a particular shopping experience at a home improvement store. She was there with her two beautiful adopted African American children and she had asked a sales associate for assistance in finding a plumbing component. The associate looked at her and asked, "No wedding ring? He was good enough to have babies with, but not good enough to marry, eh?"

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<sup>2</sup> Ruiz, Don Miguel. "The Four Agreements," San Rafael: Amber-Allen Publishing, 1997.

She was crushed, by this man’s assumptions. Our assumptions don’t just make us look bad, they hurt the people about whom we make them.

Once again, author Don Miguel Ruiz cautions us:

Don’t make assumptions. Making assumptions—whether it’s about what your partner really means by that one-word text, how a friend could possibly be late to your big party or why a stranger made that odd comment—leads you to create what may be a false scenario in your head, putting you at the center of the latest drama . . . We make all sorts of assumptions because we don’t have the courage to ask questions. We make the assumption that everybody sees life the way we do.<sup>3</sup>

Ruiz says that the way to avoid making assumptions is to make a conscious effort to find the quieter space in our minds. “If we go deeper,” he writes, “if we find a place in between thoughts—that inner silence—then we will see that we really can control our thoughts and we can create that silence inside of us.” We need to slow our roll, find the silence, think, and ask questions, instead of making assumptions.

For two thousand years most Christians have assumed that Zacchaeus was a nasty little guy who lined his pockets with the suffering of his fellows and had a radical conversion experience when he met Jesus. However, it’s every bit as likely that he was a generous man who was unfairly judged by his fellows until Jesus came along and restored him to community. The moral of last week’s parable was simple—don’t judge. And I suggest that the moral of today’s story is equally simple—don’t assume. Instead, let’s slow our roll, find the silence, think, and ask questions instead of making assumptions. I think we’ll find that people are often far better than we’d assumed them to be. May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

