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Irony, Tragedy, and Opportunity

Luke 19:1-44

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What images come to your mind when you think about Palm Sunday? Perhaps you didn't grow up in the church and you have no images in your mind. But for me, I think I will always be affected by the church which I grew up in and some of the pictures that are in my head. Palm Sunday was always an exciting time at our church, and one of the most vivid snapshots I remember is of our little children's choir – four, five, and six year olds with these tiny little white robes and palm branches – dancing around in circles as they would process down the main center aisle. It was a time of big music and celebration; it was a time of joy; it was a time of anticipation. Growing up, I always loved Palm Sunday because I knew the next week was Easter and that was a time of celebration both in terms of going to church and the things that we would do. We'd have special services, maybe a breakfast at church – all kinds of things there – and then of course, after church when we'd go home and we'd search for and find more candy than we ever knew what to do with. As a child, I saw Palm Sunday as a time of joy and a time of anticipation.

I think many of us look at it that way and I think it's right that we do. I think that's consistent with what we see in scripture of the time leading up to Palm Sunday and the time leading up to the Easter week. But when you study the text and you really look in to it, you find that there's more to Palm Sunday than simply joy and anticipation. It was actually a time of irony, a time of tragedy, and a time of opportunity. If you have a Bible with you this morning, would you turn with me to Luke chapter 19 and let's look together at those days in Jesus' ministry.

Luke 19 verse 1:

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. (*NASB, Luke 19: 1)

Now, that's a typical kind of verse that you would normally probably just read right on by and move on to the next thing thinking it's just sort of thrown in there, but in reality what Luke is saying in verse 1 is packed with meaning because we need to understand the context of what we are about to read. He says **"Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through."** He wasn't at the point in time in his ministry where he was just kind of spending long periods of time here, or just going there and doing lots and lots of teaching. Jesus was headed on a journey toward a destination. And we know exactly what that was because He made it very clear to his disciples at the end of chapter 18. In verse 31, he tells them exactly what lies ahead.

Then He took the twelve aside and said to them, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and all things which are written through the prophets about the Son of Man will be accomplished. For He will be handed over to the Gentiles, and will be mocked and mistreated and spit upon, and after they have scourged Him, they will kill Him; and the third day He will rise again." But the disciples understood none of these things, and the meaning of this statement was hidden from them, and they did not comprehend the things that were said. (Luke 18:31-34)

But Jesus has made it clear. They are on the way to Jerusalem. This is the time when the whole thing is coming to a climax and, indeed, it's a time of movement, anticipation, and

He is fully on mission. And in that context – you need to have that context to really appreciate what happens next.

Verse 2:

And there was a man called by the name of Zaccheus; he was a chief tax collector and he was rich. Zaccheus was trying to see who Jesus was, and was unable because of the crowd, for he was small in stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree in order to see Him, for He was about to pass through that way. (vs. 2-4)

Again, I flash back in my mind when I first hear the story of Zaccheus to those images I had in Sunday school and songs about a “wee little man” and pictures of a guy up in a tree trying to peer down and see Jesus. And you almost get a picture of kind of a silly little rich fool who the people might have laughed at and pushed aside and he’s trying to get in the crowd and see, and he can’t, so he runs on ahead. You know, if we were to make a movie today of the story of Zaccheus, surely Danny Devito would be cast in the part of Zaccheus, right? That kind of gives you the imagery in your head of him trying to shuffle in there and that not working, and running ahead and climbing up into the tree, and there he sits perched and ready, and then verse 5:

When Jesus came to the place, He looked up and said to him, "Zaccheus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house."

Interesting how Jesus worded what he said: “**hurry and come down, for today I *must* stay at your house.**” “I *must* stay.” Why? Verse 6:

And he hurried and came down and received Him gladly. When they saw it, [*the people saw it*] they all began to grumble, saying, "He has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." (vs. 6-7)

Why did all of the people begin to grumble when Jesus starts to head off with Zaccheus? I think there are probably several factors coming into play. Certainly there was the issue of jealousy. Jesus was well known at this point in time. He’d done so many miracles. There’s a large crowd that is processing with Him as He heads toward Jerusalem and He comes into Jericho. And Jesus is at almost celebrity status at this point and time, so any of those people in the crowd would have loved for Him to look at them and say, “I want to spend some time with you.” And so there’s probably certainly a jealousy factor.

But there’s more to it than that. Because sometimes our Sunday school images of Zaccheus leave out an important part of understanding what was really happening in the culture. Because Zaccheus wasn’t just a silly little man; Zaccheus was a powerful, hated man. Zaccheus would have been filthy rich and that would have been the right terminology to describe it because he would have been the one who had ill-gotten gain. His money would have come from extorting the people by over collecting on taxes, and in essence, he had robbed every single one of the people in that crowd and he would have been literally hated.

You know, another image to put in our mind, really, is that Zaccheus back then would have been akin to having the scruples of a drug dealer today. You picture the guy with the car, the money, the jewels, and the clothes living in some impoverished inner-city neighborhood. Everyone around him is suffering but he is living high, but he is doing so on the backs of other people through ill-gotten gain. That's the image of Zaccheus. It would be a little bit like if today there was somehow someone here in Lincoln who had gotten into your house and robbed you. And not only once, but they had robbed you repeatedly. And not only you, but your neighbor, and your neighbor next to you, and somehow, somehow, this person was allowed to continue to be free and to continue to rob you day in and day out. I think there's no question that person would be hated.

Now imagine if some great spiritual leader – maybe Billy Graham comes to town – and people are gathering, and people from the churches all over Lincoln want to get close to Dr. Graham and spend some time with him, and suddenly he looks out in the crowd and he sees the one who has robbed everyone in the town and say, "I want to spend time with you." I think every one of us would have something happen inside us where we would say, "That's not right. That's not fair. I mean, here we are coming to worship week in and week out and trying to spend time knowing and serving God, and then this great leader comes and who does he choose to spend time with? The one who's robbed every one of us."

You know, that reaction inside us ought to inform us about a little bit of the true condition of our hearts. Because when you and I say extraordinary grace being extended to the unbelievably undeserving, and we have a reaction that says, "That's not fair," what it reveals about me and what it reveals about you is that we somehow think we are more deserving and that person is less deserving. And that is an indication in our hearts of a self-righteousness that we think somehow we have earned greater favor with God. And it's also an expression of a works righteousness that somehow by what we do and what we have done, we've earned a greater standing and a greater favor with a holy God. But situations like this with Zaccheus remind us that our salvation is simply an act of amazing grace.

Verse 8:

Zaccheus stopped and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much." And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham. (vs. 8-9)

And when Jesus refers to him as a son of Abraham, He is giving a hint that saving faith has taken place. And in this amazing moment of amazing grace, the one who was a total crook suddenly in an instant becomes both honest and generous. What irony. What irony in who Jesus pursued and what amazing irony in how he responded. And then Jesus goes on to tell us that's exactly what He is about. Verse 10:

For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."

That's the mission. That's the heart of the Savior. That's what Jesus was all about. Why, in verse 5, did Jesus say, "Zaccheus, I must stay at your house"? I believe it's because Jesus came to seek and save that which is lost and Jesus knows He is on His way to Jerusalem. He understands He is about to face a cross, a tomb, and eventually, a resurrection. And why did Jesus go to Jerusalem knowing

those things? Why was He willing to endure the cross and the tomb? And why did He rise again? He did all those things because the Son of Man came to seek and save that which was lost. And I believe as He headed to Jerusalem, while He's in Jericho, He sees in the life of Zaccheus an opportunity to teach us a point that we simply cannot miss. And that is this: If even Zaccheus can be forgiven, so can you. So can you.

It doesn't matter where you've been. It doesn't matter who you've been. There is not a person in this room that is beyond the grace of God. And Jesus this day – just like He did to Zaccheus – wants to reach out to you and wants to do the same kind of transforming work in your life that He did in Zaccheus'. For if even Zaccheus can be saved, so can you. So can your neighbor, no matter what they're like – even the neighbor that maybe drives you crazy because they're rude to everyone else in the neighborhood. So can your boss, even if he's dishonest, even if she doesn't treat the employees rightly or fairly. So can your least favorite co-worker, the one you just try and tolerate day in and day out. So can even your greatest enemy. That's what's so amazing about grace. And the sad part is that throughout the coming week, all around the world in what they will call "holy week," people will try and do acts of penance to somehow show God that they're serious and to somehow make themselves deserving when in reality all along the price has already been paid. We just need to accept it.

Verse 11:

While they were listening to these things, Jesus went on to tell a parable, because He was near Jerusalem, and they supposed that the kingdom of God was going to appear immediately.

Now verse 11 has a couple of important connectives in it. First of all, there's a connective to what has just happened. He says, "**While they were listening to these things**". In other words, Luke wants to make it clear that what's about to be shared relates directly to what has just happened and what Jesus said is His mission to seek and save the lost. There's a connective back to what's just happened. There's also a connective to what's ahead. He tells this parable because "he was near Jerusalem, and they supposed the kingdom was going to appear immediately," so he's connecting this to the events that are about to take place.

So this parable becomes very important because it's sandwiched right in between the story of what God has done for Zaccheus and the statement of Jesus' mission and the events that are right about to unfold. So I want to look at it from that angle and actually zip ahead and look at what those events are, then we'll come back and look at the parable. So verse 28:

In Luke 19 verse 28 we read:

After He had said these things, He was going on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When He approached Bethphage and Bethany, near the mount that is called Olivet, He sent two of the disciples, saying, "Go into the village ahead of you; there, as you enter, you will find a colt tied on which no one yet has ever sat; untie it and bring it here." If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' you shall say, 'The Lord has need of it.'" So those who were sent went away and found it just as He had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners said to them, "Why are you untying the colt?" They said, "The Lord has need of it." (vs. 28-34)

Again, it's important for us to understand that God was sovereignly orchestrating all these events. All that happened to Jesus was not an accident; it wasn't a mistake; it wasn't even unknown. We saw there at the end of Luke 18, Jesus knew exactly what was happening. Here again, we see that Jesus is orchestrating the circumstances as with this incident with the colt. It's another demonstration of His sovereign understanding.

Verse 35:

They brought it to Jesus, and they threw their coats on the colt and put Jesus on it. As He was going, they were spreading their coats on the road. As soon as He was approaching, near the descent of the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the miracles which they had seen, shouting:

**"BLESSED IS THE KING WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD;
Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" (vs. 35-38)**

This is the triumphal entry. This is a scene packed with great joy; it's also a scene replete with meaning because even this whole thing about Jesus going and sending for the colt, and then getting on the colt and beginning to ride toward Jerusalem is a fulfillment of a prophecy that was given over 400 years earlier in Zechariah 9:9 when Zechariah said that one day "Behold, your king is coming to you riding on a colt." And this is the moment of presentation of the long awaited Messiah for the people of Israel. And as the people begin to cheer, they begin to say the words that come from Psalm 118, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD," and this is an important thing as well because that was a psalm that was used in the Feast of Tabernacles and when they would recite this psalm it was recited as a reference to the day that Messiah would come. So they know what's going on here. Here, right now is the moment; it's the triumphal entry – the presentation of Jesus as the Messiah. And when they start to yell out from that recitation from Psalm 118, the Pharisees flew in and they said, "This is too much."

Verse 39:

**Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, rebuke Your disciples."
But Jesus answered, "I tell you, if these become silent, the stones will cry out!" (vs. 39-40)**

You see, the Pharisees are upset because they think the disciples are saying something that's inappropriate to the context. But Jesus says, "No, they're not out of line. This *is* it. And if the disciples don't declare this moment, the very creation will cry out." And that whole scene is what makes the next thing we encounter so striking. Picture all of this celebration, all of this joy headed toward Jerusalem, and then verse 41:

When He approached Jerusalem, He saw the city and wept over it, saying, "If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes. "For the days will come upon you when your enemies will throw up a barricade against you, and surround you and hem you in on every side, and they will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will

not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation." (vs. 41-44)

It's a total mood change. Triumph becomes tragedy. And again we see Jesus' sovereign understanding of the events that are at hand. He understands what's ahead for Him, but He also understands what's ahead for them. He understands that because they will reject Him as their Messiah, they will suffer greatly and exactly what Jesus prophesized here in Luke 19 comes to pass in A.D. 70. Historians tell us that the Roman general Titus came and built a siege work against Jerusalem and he attacked the city until it was overcome and literally destroyed it until there was not one stone upon another. Just what Jesus knew and said would happen did.

So in this time of anticipation, in this time of joy we also see irony; we see tragedy. But in this moment there is also opportunity. Turn with me back again to verse 11. In verse 10 Jesus has said the Son of Man has come to seek and save that which is lost and then we're told while they're hearing that, he goes on to tell a parable because they supposed that the kingdom was going to come immediately as they're headed toward Jerusalem.

Verse 12:

So He said, "A nobleman went to a distant country to receive a kingdom for himself, and then return." And he called ten of his slaves, and gave them ten minas and said to them, 'Do business with this until I come back.' (vs. 12-13)

In this situation is a little bit similar – this parable – to the parable of the talents. But a key distinction between these parables is in the parable of the talents Jesus is talking about the different things – the different gifts that He's entrusted to each one of us. Here in the parable of the minas, it's not about differing gifts. It's just about our being responsible to the mission in our moment of opportunity. So this king has gone away and in the time that he's away he's entrusted something very precious and valuable to his followers.

And then in verse 14 we read:

"But his citizens hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, 'We do not want this man to reign over us.'

And it's a reminder of rejection just as in Jerusalem that coming week Jesus will be rejected. Throughout the centuries and the generations there are people who say, "We don't want this king." And they just shake their fists at God and they out-and-out reject Him, His message, and His offer.

Verse 15:

"When he returned, [he does come back] after receiving the kingdom, [he is the king] he ordered that these slaves, to whom he had given the money, be called to him so that he might know what business they had done." The first appeared, saying, 'Master, your mina has made ten minas more.' "And he said to him, 'Well done, good slave, because you have been faithful in a very little thing, you are to be in authority over ten cities.' (vs. 15-17)

What is the reward for faithfulness? It's greater entrustment. The king seeing the faithfulness of his servant says to him, "I will entrust even more into your care because you've proven yourself to be worthy."

It continues in verse 18:

"The second came, saying, 'Your mina, master, has made five minas.' "And he said to him also, 'And you are to be over five cities.' (vs. 18-19)

A similar theme, but then it changes in verse 20:

"Another came, saying, 'Master, here is your mina, which I kept put away in a handkerchief; for I was afraid of you, because you are an exacting man; you take up what you did not lay down and reap what you did not sow.' (vs. 20-21)

The third servant was completely unlike the first two. He was unfaithful with that which had been entrusted to him. And the reason is because he had two problems: he was afraid and he was selfish. Let's take them in reverse order. First in regard to him being selfish: at the end of verse 21 he says, **"you take up what you did not lay down and reap what you did not sow."** It's as if he's looking at this situation and saying, "This doesn't make any sense. Why should I bust my back for your benefit? Why should I go out there and do all the work knowing you're going to come and take all the profit? That's not fair. I don't want that." The problem is that he wanted to be the king. And I think it's really important for us to look at the life of this third servant because the reality is he has a problem that is similar to the primary problem in the heart of every person. Deep inside me, deep inside every one of you is this desire to say, "I want to be in it for me. I want to live my life to please me. I want to live my life in such a way that I will gain good and I will gain glory." Ultimately, what I'm saying is, "I want to be the king." A mantra of this generation in our country today is this idea of being the captain of your own soul, the captain of your destiny. And when we have that kind of thinking in our heart, we are supplanting God's rightful rule in our lives. We are refusing to acknowledge that He is God and that He is king, and we are in a sense saying, "I want to be king." And we're living lives that are totally self-centered.

And so very often that comes about because of the first problem this servant had: the problem of being afraid. Verse 21 again: **"I was afraid of you, because you are an exacting man;"** "I was afraid because you're harsh; you're rigid; you're hard." And fear is a real problem because it can lead to rebellion. You see, silent rebellion is often born in our hearts when we are too afraid to trust God. Now, this isn't the kind of rebellion that's shaking your fist at God. This is that quiet rebellion where we just quietly and disobediently do our own thing. We may even be going through all the right motions on the outside, but on the inside we're the one who are in charge.

It's a little bit like the story of the mom who was having trouble with her child who was kind of wanting to establish himself, shall we say. He was about four or five years old – this little boy – and he was just beginning to disobey and kind of do his own thing and go his own way. And one day, the mom's at home with him and he's supposed to be sitting and working on a little project, and he keeps getting up and he keeps going away. And she keeps telling him, "Go back and sit down," and he's just not obeying and she's getting exasperated. And finally this mom decides, "I've got to take control of this situation." So she takes the little boy and she sits him down and she gives him one of those looks – one of those motherly looks – and says, "Bobby, you will stay seated in that chair." And Bobby looks up at her and you can almost see the wheels turning as he's thinking to himself:

How far can I push this? And looking at the look on his mother's face, he decides: *Probably not that far.* So Bobby sits down and sits in the chair and it's then as his mother's walking away feeling a sense of triumph that he says to her, "I may be sitting down on the outside, but I'm standing up on the inside."

Churches are filled with people who are standing up on the inside, coming to church week in and week out, not involved in anything really all that bad, and yet in our hearts a quiet, silent rebellion and disobedience, an unwillingness to trust God completely with all that we are, and so often it's born out of fear. We're too afraid to just shake our fists at God and out and out reject the whole thing, but we're also a bit too afraid to really dive in giving Him all that we are. And I think this lesson from the third servant is pretty important for us to look at and to consider our own lives because we need to understand that Jesus has a strong rebuke for him.

Verse 22:

"He said to him, 'By your own words I will judge you, you worthless slave. Did you know that I am an exacting man, taking up what I did not lay down and reaping what I did not sow?'

And by the way, the king here is not agreeing with his character assessment. He's not saying, "That's how I am." He is simply holding him accountable on the basis of his standard of his very own words. And you see it's his words that reveal the deepest inner problem in his heart and that is he has a wrong view of the king. He sees the king as hard, harsh, rigid, and exacting, and that's what leads to him being too afraid to really follow the king. The same thing can be true of us when we do not have a right view of God – when we somehow see God as being harsh and rigid and indifferent, and not having our best in mind our response will be the same – to be too afraid to give ourselves wholeheartedly to Him. And so this king rebukes him and he says to him in verse 23:

'Then why did you not put my money in the bank, and having come, I would have collected it with interest?' 'Then he said to the bystanders, 'Take the mina away from him and give it to the one who has the ten minas.' 'And they said to him, 'Master, he has ten minas already.' 'I tell you that to everyone who has, more shall be given, but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away. 'But these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slay them in my presence.' (vs. 23-27)

Condemnation for those who reject this king, loss for those who patronize or somehow seek to pacify this king, but great reward – tremendous gain – for those who faithfully and fruitfully serve this king. So which one are you?

Jesus told us earlier in Luke that you can know by our fruits, "by your fruits you'll know this," which raises that question: Are you bearing fruit for God as you seek to faithfully serve Him as a part of His mission. Are you being intentional about giving all that you are to Him and wholeheartedly seeking Him and asking Him to bear fruit in your lives? Are you seeking to love the neighbor, that co-worker, your boss, your friends? Are you intentionally striving in the power of the Holy Spirit to become kind and gentle and patient and compassionate asking God to bear fruit through you that others might be drawn to the Savior. Because you see, the power for reproduction and multiplication lies in the fruit.

You know if we were to go down to Nebraska City and we were to go and find one of those apple trees, and we were to go pluck one of those ripe apples off, we'd look at it and it would be shiny and beautiful and look so good. And then you'd bite into it and it would taste so good that it just draws you in. It's just so attractive. And then if we were to cut that apple open and we'd look and deep near the core would be those tiny black seeds that would become the agent of multiplication and reproduction. For it's through those seeds found in the fruit that that single tree can become an entire orchard.

The same is true with us. As we seek to trust God and give ourselves wholeheartedly to Him and say, "God, make me more loving; make me more kind; make me more gentle. Help me to be intentional about reaching out to the people all around us right here in our city who don't know Christ." As we seek to love them and care for them, they begin to be drawn in and to say, "That tastes good. What is it about you that makes you so different?" And then we have the chance to introduce them to our King which is what the mission is all about. And Jesus made it clear today again He is on a mission to seek and to save that which is lost. And this is a great time of year for us to take advantage of the opportunity.

Bryan mentioned again this coming weekend is Easter. That is a Sunday when more people will be willing to come to church than any other weekend of the year. And in the weeks to come as we have the "Life After Death" series, we're hoping to provide messages that will be attractive to people who are exploring and trying to understand what Christianity is all about. This is a great opportunity and a great time for us. The question is: Will we do our part? Will we be entering into relationship with people? Will we be intentional about seeking to love them? Will we take the initiative to invite someone even to a service? And you know, as we do the irony is that some of the least likely will say yes. The tragedy is that some of the most spiritual or religious will say no. But the bottom line is both of those things are out of our hands. What we must decide is whether or not we will be faithful and fruitful in this – our moment of opportunity.

Lord, I just ask that You would be doing a work in my heart and in each of our hearts, God, that would cause us to see You for who You really are because when we see You as You are, we find out You are trustworthy because You are so good. And as we see that, Lord, I pray we give all that we are back to you and say, "Lord, I want to be a part of Your mission. I want to trust You and I want to reach out with love to people all around me who are without God and without hope. And God, I pray that You would lead each one of us to be intentional about that, not just in the big picture but in very specific and tangible ways. Put in our hearts how You want us to process and respond that we might be a part of Your mission to seek and save that which is lost. In Your name we pray, Amen

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