

## **A Forgiving Community - Katy Fazio - 10/7/2024**

I first learned a reverence for communion at a Christian summer camp. One of the defining experiences of my teens was attending a two-week Christian summer camp in Ocean Park, Maine. This is a place my mother, aunts, and uncles had gone to as teens, my older brother had gone and he was a counselor at the time I was going, my cousins had gone, and after me their kids went too. This is a holy place to me, a place where I immediately feel the presence of God upon entering. And more than just my family ties to the place, I have made lifelong friends from that camp. It's not an understatement to say that I'm standing in this pulpit because of the love and faith poured into me there.

But this is where it gets a little dicey because I haven't been able to describe this experience without making people feel uncomfortable. There was a special evening communion service about halfway through camp, held in candlelight. What I learned then was that before we take communion we should get right with God, and that getting right with God necessarily involved getting right with our neighbors. There was a special time leading up to the passing of the bread and juice where we were invited to confess our sins, maybe to God, maybe to each other, maybe on the phone to somebody back home. And the hope was that in the confession of harm, repair could be found, relationships could be transformed.

I can't tell you how meaningful this service was to me. I don't remember now the specific teenage drama going on in my life, but I remember how it felt for a fellow camper to hold my hands and pray to God that it would be healed. It was the first time anybody had given me such personal and tender spiritual care. I didn't know that kids *could* pray like that.

The service also gave my brother and I the chance to talk like we never had because in this environment we had permission to be vulnerable in a way we just didn't have anywhere else.

I really struggle recounting this because a lot of people- rightly so!! – are uncomfortable with the idea of asking children to confess their sins to each other. Progressive Christians tend to shy away from conversations about sin at all because of how the church has weaponized the word to control and abuse people for generations. But the bible talks about sin all the time!

So let's talk about Zacchaeus the Sinner, because that's what the crowd calls him.

Zacchaeus was the chief tax collector in Jericho, which meant that everybody knew him and everybody hated him. There's some background on tax collectors that's important. Tax collectors worked for the Roman empire, but they were often *given* the job because they were already deeply entrenched in the community. That's why Rome picked them, because the tax collector would know whose businesses were doing well, how big everybody's flocks were, who might be getting a windfall this year.

The people of Jericho probably watched Zacchaeus grow up. He had shared meals with them. He had worshipped with them. And then he betrayed them . He stole from them. He sided with the occupying army.

Whatever reasons Zacchaues had, we can assume that he wasn't happy with how things were turning out as a Tax Collector. *We can assume that* because when Zacchaeus hears about the rabbi passing through town preaching about forgiveness of sins, he is so *desperate* to hear what Jesus has to say that he runs ahead of the crowd and climbs a tree just to catch a glimpse.

You know, as an aside, when R.G. and I were making the preaching schedule over the summer and I said I would take the “Forgiving Community” I actually said to R.G. “I’ll preach on Zacchaeus, the sermon will write itself.” But I was wrong. Because the community in this story is *not* very forgiving. Jesus sees the humanity in Zacchaeus, sees the longing, the regret, and understands. Jesus says that he will be going to Zachhaeus’s house for dinner, and the crowd starts to complain. “He’s going to eat at the house of a sinner.” This is not a community that’s practiced in forgiveness. This is a community that’s been too deeply wounded to see a way forward.

we hate to talk about sin because as a society we have been so indoctrinated into this idea that the only way to respond to a mistake is by punishment. It’s baked into every part of our lives; in schools, in hospitals, in churches, in the criminal justice system, in foreign policy. For the most part we respond to harm by causing more harm. By creating more separation, more isolation, more escalation. We haven’t learned much in the 2000 years since Jesus rode through Jericho.

But it starts at this table. At this table where we say all are welcome. Where we acknowledge that we do sin. We do fail. We hurt each other by accident and we hurt each other on purpose. We forget birthdays and we send nasty emails. We lose our temper. We turn away from our neighbors when they are in need.

But that’s not *who we are*. The crowd calls Zacchaeus a sinner. But that’s not what Jesus calls him. Jesus calls Zacchaeus by name. Calls him a son of Abraham. Calls him saved. Jesus offers Zacchaeus a path to reconciliation that moves him to repair the harm he’s done, that stops the cycle of separation. And it starts with an invitation to a meal.

At this table, Jesus calls us beloved. Jesus calls us neighbors. Jesus puts us on a path to reconciliation when reconciliation seems impossible. Invites us to be peacemakers, when peace seems impossible. If we are going to be a forgiving community, we start by following Jesus, by having the courage to take the first step forward. A forgiving community acts as an example to the world by having the courage to believe a better world is possible. Because it is possible. We make it possible. May it be so.