

“Unexpected Angels”
Luke 19:1-10
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In the fall of 1981, I was a rather naive 22 year old, and I drove for the first time to the East Coast, to the state of New Jersey, to the city of Princeton, and I was so excited. I was going to be attending Princeton Theological Seminary, one of the most respected theological institutions in the world, home of Charles Hodge, BB Warfield, and many other Reformed scholars that only theological nerds knew, and I was going to study there. Princeton Theological Seminary, where generations of Presbyterian clergy had been trained to serve the church and now I was going to join those ranks of men and women preaching the gospel and creating disciples for the glory of God and the Presbyterian Church. I pulled on to campus and stopped to find my way among the stately buildings to Alexander Hall and a voice said, “Can I help you?” And I turned around to see a young man about my age walking up the walk toward me with a case of beer on his shoulder. After he pointed the way to Alexander Hall, he introduced himself as a senior Master of Divinity student. And offered me a beer. Having come from a Christian school in the Pacific Northwest that didn't even allow alcohol on campus, I couldn't help thinking to myself, “this is going to be different from what I thought.” And it was. I really found that out my first day of class. I had taken two years of Greek grammar while I was in college, because I thought that I really wanted to focus on the study of Scripture, particularly New Testament, while I was in seminary, and I couldn't wait to hear from all the eminent scholars that Princeton had to offer. My first class was in Colossians and Philippians using the Greek text of those letters. The professor was J. Christian Beker. The first day, Dr. Beker came strolling into class, hair unkempt, lit cigarette in his hand, and began pacing around the room while he spoke to us about what he knew about the apostle Paul and we didn't. Later that morning I saw Dr. Beker on the steps of Miller chapel. One of the highlights of life at Princeton Seminary was daily worship at Miller Chapel. The preaching and the music were always outstanding. I was glad to see Dr. Beker there, ready to go into worship. But he

didn't go in. He never did. That was his practice. To sit on the steps outside while worship was going on inside, smoke his cigarettes and talk Yankees baseball with anyone who would listen. Dr. Beker was a brilliant, intense, obnoxious character. I wondered why the seminary put up with him. Soon I realized that his intensity showed in how he ran his class. Each person would take a turn translating a passage of the letter to be presented in class the next morning. When reading the translation, one could expect to be interrupted by Dr. Beker, challenged by him, interrogated by him, and even told that our translation was stupid if we hadn't put enough work into it. I hated that class. I was scared of Dr. Beker. He drove me nuts. And somewhere along the line, I realized that I had not only learned a lot, but I had begun to value God's word in a way I never had before. I took more of his classes. He would hate it if he ever heard me say it, but for me he was one of God's unexpected angels.

You know those people. They may be people that you don't like, or that you don't even notice, but they are people that God uses to show his love, to tell the good news, to speak a prophetic word. Zaccheus was such an unexpected angel as well. There was no one more unlikely than Zaccheus. He was not only a tax collector and had become rich being a tax collector, become rich off the money of others, but on top of all of that, he was short! This was not an impressive figure of a man. This was not Charleton Heston or John Wayne or someone that Hollywood would choose to portray someone who was chosen by God. He was a short guy whom everyone hated. But it was this guy whom Jesus saw that day in Jericho, this guy out of all the other people there that Jesus called to and said, "Zaccheus, come down. Let's go eat at your house today." And immediately the people begin to grumble. Why would Jesus go to his house? Doesn't he know what kind of character he is? But Zaccheus is filled with excitement and gratitude. And in response he says that he will give away half of what he owns to the poor and if he defrauds anyone, he promises that he will repay that person four times what was lost. See, just by Jesus coming to his house, he changes into a good man. Or does he? One of the things I would argue for in Dr. Beker's class is for an issue like the one here. It turns out that there is an interesting translation issue in this passage. The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible has translated a

particular verb in the future tense “I will give to the poor.” But the verb can also be translated as “I am giving to the poor.” Which does Luke mean? Does he mean that Zaccheus has changed because of the presence of Jesus and now he will be generous to the poor? Or does he mean that Zaccheus is already generous to the poor, that he already gives half of his wealth to the poor? Does he mean that Zaccheus is misjudged by the rest of the people because he is a tax collector, because he is rich, and because he is short? Is he being lifted up as an example of the life-changing power of Christ, or is he being pointed to as an example of unseen generosity? Is Zaccheus one of those unexpected angels, a person we would never think of, who all of a sudden bursts into our lives as an example of God's generosity and grace.

Grace is the sometimes unexpected and always undeserved blessing of God. Dr. Beker was a sign of God's grace in a crazy way as I was learning about the nuances of the Scriptures. Zaccheus was an angel of God's grace to the people of his time, showing them how easy it is to misjudge someone and how a person of generous spirit can pass on their gifts to others.

Today is a day when we celebrate another triumph of God's grace that came from another of God's unexpected angels. 499 years ago tomorrow, on October 31, 1517, a young monk tacked a note on the door of the church in Wittenberg, a small town in what is now Germany. The monk, who taught theology was objecting to a practice of the church and posted this note because he wanted there to be an open debate about the selling of indulgences. This was a practice in the church at the time that proclaimed that a person's good deeds were helpful in getting him or her out of Purgatory. Purgatory was the place one went after death, it was believed, in order to be purged of your sins and made clean enough to enter heaven. One of the things one could do to lessen the time spent there was to be generous in one's giving to the church. So the church would sell indulgences—the more you gave, the less time you had to spend in Purgatory and the sooner you got to heaven. The Pope at the time was building the Sistine Chapel and paying people like Michelangelo so he needed to raise a lot of money. So there was a push to sell indulgences. This monk believed that was not in keeping with what he

knew of God's grace. This monk had an experience of his own sinfulness. He knew he was an imperfect person who was often selfish and prideful no matter how hard he tried not to be. But he also knew that God loved him anyway. God's grace is given to us because of his love, not because of our character. We are saved by grace, not because of works. We are saved by grace. Not because of what we do, but because of who God is. And God is love. A simple idea. But one that changed the world when Martin Luther posted his 95 theses, on "the power and efficacy of indulgences," on October 31, 1517 and the Reformation had begun. Luther, who didn't really want to start his own church, just to reform the one that was there, was an unexpected angel, a messenger of God's grace.

And I hope that's what we are about today also. We talk about giving money, but not so that we can earn something for ourselves or to rack up points in heaven. We give to the church out of gratitude for God's grace and our hope to be part of what he is doing among us now. And so we sing songs from Luther today, and from John Calvin and from the Scottish Psalter, all the results of those Reformed ideas and then we finish by celebrating all of God's saints by singing "For All the Saints." And as we do, I hope that we will think of those unexpected angels, those saints that God puts into our lives, those gifts of God's grace, those people who may not think of themselves as angel or saints, but whom God uses to change us and even change the world. Maybe one of them is you.