

# THE TURTLE SWIMS FREE

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*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." (Luke 19:5)*

Let's begin today with a confession that I will make before God and this company. From time to time I succumb to temptation and go down the rabbit hole of YouTube. As you likely know, YouTube is a video sharing platform where you can search for and watch just about anything, from the profound to the ridiculous. After watching one video you'll see a menu of related videos that YouTube has selected for you to watch. You choose one, then another, then another, and soon there goes an hour you'll never get back again. You went down the rabbit hole of YouTube.

Lately, YouTube has been suggesting two strange genres of videos for me to watch. The first is by a professional competitive eater by the name of Adam Moran. That's right: a professional competitive eater. Moran is British and sports a big beard. In fact, the name of his channel is Beard Meats Food, and he will travel to any restaurant near or far that offers an eating challenge. For example, if you can eat their gigantic pizza loaded with toppings, or the five-patty burger platter with mounds of fries, or the full English breakfast with extra pancakes and sausage within a certain time limit, you'll win a free T-shirt, your name will go on the restaurant's wall of fame, and the meal will be free. Adam Moran sets up his video camera and beats the challenge every time. I don't know how he does it. He is fit and trim, but has an enormous capacity to put away food. It's a strange combination of disgusting and mesmerizing to watch. Perhaps I'm envious. I'd like to eat all those burgers and pizzas too and not gain any weight.

The second theme of videos is definitely of a more redeeming spiritual value. For some reason YouTube decided that I would enjoy watching sea turtles, particularly those with shells that are hopelessly encrusted with barnacles. What happens is some good-deed doer on the beach will find a sea turtle that can barely move due to the encumbrance of the barnacles and other marine parasites stuck to it. The rescuer, usually with a Go-Pro camera on his or her head, will gently cradle the turtle in hand and with a blade patiently pry and scrape off the barnacles, some as big as golf balls. It takes some doing, but again, it's mesmerizing to watch, especially as the beautiful turtle emerges from beneath the crusty accretions. These videos always end happily, with the turtle swimming away free from the burden of the barnacles.

Today's reading from the Gospel of Luke (19:1-10) reminds me of these two video themes: on the one hand, the remorseless eating machine, and on the other hand, the turtle swimming away free. Zacchaeus of Jericho fits both categories. When we first meet him he was clearly living the proverbial life of a competitive eater: stuffing as much into himself as he possibly could, accumulating more wealth than he could ever spend. He was a taker, not a giver. He was the chief tax collector in the wealthy town of Jericho. In the days of Jesus, tax collectors worked for the Romans who occupied the land. The Jews hated paying taxes to the foreign infidel, and they hated those who would stoop to collect the taxes on behalf of the enemy. Worse yet, people assumed that the tax collectors were cheating them out of more than even the Romans required them to pay. So to say that Zacchaeus was a rich man would be a gross understatement. Not only did he have too much on his own plate, he was helping himself to the more modest rations on the plates of others.

Apparently, if Zacchaeus could speak to us today he would have a confession to make. What would he confess? He would confess before God and this company that his chosen way of being wasn't working. Perhaps he was tired of being the most disliked person in town. Perhaps he was realizing that the abundance of his possessions was a burden and not a blessing. We don't really know, but it was something. If all were well with Zacchaeus' soul he would have remained content to count his riches and go on acquiring more. Instead, when he heard that Jesus was passing through town, he decided that he needed to seek out the miracle working prophet and preacher. Perhaps Jesus would be able to free him from whatever was burdening his soul.

As we heard Luke describe him, Zacchaeus was short of stature. He was so short, in fact, that he couldn't break through the crowd to get near Jesus or even see over them. So Zacchaeus ran ahead in the direction Jesus was going, climbed a sycamore tree, and waited for Jesus to pass. When Jesus did come by with the crowd, he looked up, saw Zacchaeus in the tree, and called him, "*Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.*" The upstanding citizens all complained: what was Jesus thinking, dining in the house of a sinner? But it was there that we begin to see the transformation of Zacchaeus from a hungry beast to a sea turtle about to swim free. When Zacchaeus came down from the tree he was like a barnacle-encrusted sea turtle in the hands of his redeemer. Clearly, Luke condenses what must have been a lengthier process of Jesus' prying and scraping away the weight of sin on Zacchaeus' back. But eventually the chief tax collector *stood 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."* The taker had become a giver. *And Jesus said to Zacchaeus, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."* We have no evidence to suggest that Zacchaeus followed Jesus on the road to Jerusalem. Instead, like a newly unencumbered sea turtle, he swam away free.

So here we are on Pledge Sunday, and no preacher could possibly ask for a better Gospel passage than this as a launching pad for what we at Grace Church playfully call my annual "Sermon on the Amount." The obvious line of logic here would go something like this: we've heard about Zacchaeus, who went out on a limb for Jesus, offered to give away fifty-percent of all he owned, and finally promised a fourfold restoration of every dime he'd ever swindled. What is asked of us? How do we access the salvation given to Zacchaeus? How much do we need to give? Good news: not fifty-percent, not a four-fold restoration of what you've swindled, but a measly ten-percent. The tithe never sounded so good, did it? So let's all go out on a limb for Jesus. The budget of Grace Church is calling to us.

On Pledge Sunday we could certainly talk about the budget, but we won't. Yes, we could talk about how the budget of Grace Church on its revenue side is like a three-legged stool, the three legs being annual giving from parishioners like you and me, rental income, and a responsible draw on the endowment. But you can read all that in the materials we've sent out to you, and in the brochures we've discretely and tastefully distributed in the pews. You'll read there that all three revenue sources of under stress. The pandemic has reduced our number of giving households. Retail establishments including the paint store in our building on 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue did not survive. The current state of the financial markets combined with the mediated settlements of the lawsuits brought against us have cut deeply into the endowment.

So yes, we could talk about the budget of Grace Church on Pledge Sunday, but we won't. Why not? Because the problem with such an approach is that it casts the church in the role of the professional competitive eater. It's to suggest that the goal is to feed the hungry beast with its enormous capacity to swallow resources. I submit to you that this is the old way of being Zacchaeus, before he placed himself in the hands of Jesus. Zacchaeus would be the first to confess that his old way of being wasn't working. It wasn't bringing joy. It was a life of burden not blessing.

All of us, on some level, come to church with burdens on our souls. Some of them are of our own doing. Most often, however, they are the unavoidable accretions of life in this world. We are like the sea turtles that are encrusted with so many barnacles that we can't swim or move about the way God created us to be. So think of the annual pledge campaign as the yearly opportunity to place ourselves in the gentle, healing hands of Jesus. The work of Jesus is to restore us to a right relationship with the material world. Yes, sometimes prying and scraping are necessary. In the letter to the Hebrews (10:31) we read, *It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.* It can be a fearful thing, but it is always for the healing of our souls. Zacchaeus fell into the hands of the living God. He answered the call of Jesus and swam away free because of it. He became a new creation, and thus he is our peculiar role model of faith on this Pledge Sunday.

*"Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today."* Some years ago on a Sunday morning here at Grace Church we were coming towards the end of the 9 o'clock service. Everyone had received Communion and we were just about to sing the closing hymn when I noticed that an older gentleman in a front pew, right here under the pulpit, had fainted. His wife was trying to rouse him but the man was groggy and in need of medical help. I went to the lectern and announced that we were having a medical emergency. "Is there a doctor or nurse in the house? If so please hurry and come down." Guess what. Nobody moved. Nobody in the congregation that day was a doctor or a nurse. Eventually a few people overcame their hesitation and even though they had no medical training came down to assist. It doesn't take a health care professional to call 911, and soon the man was getting the help he needed. If memory serves his blood sugar was low and after recuperating in the ER he didn't even need to be admitted to the hospital. All was well.

Later on in the day I was reflecting on the event and the particular nature of the Grace Church family, especially what many of our people do for a living. *Not even one doctor or nurse was in the house!* My confession before God and this congregation is that I then allowed my mind to drift to an alternate, even dystopian scenario. Suppose a person in the front pew were having not a medical emergency, but a sudden financial crisis. Suppose I went to the lectern and announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, there is a person in the front pew here having a fiscal emergency. Is there an investment banker in the house? If so, please hurry and come down." What would happen? My guess is that lots of people would have been present to answer the call and administer the particular healing balm they have at their disposal.

I know that I am supposed to be making a pure, spiritual appeal to you based on love for God and gratitude for all the blessings of this life. But sometimes on Pledge Sunday I feel as if I were living in that alternate, dystopian reality. On behalf of all Grace Church I become that person in the front pew and announce, *"Hello, I am having a fiscal emergency here! Is there an investment banker in the house? Really, anyone in the financial services sector will do. If so, please hurry and come down."* I don't mean to single out investment bankers and finance people alone. The message of Pledge Sunday is also for doctors and nurses, architects and lawyers, teachers and artists, homemakers and clergy, shopkeepers and hourly workers, police officers and firefighters, engineers and retired folks, students and chief tax collectors, professional competitive eaters and sea turtles of every variety who labor to carry heavy burdens. Have I missed anyone?

Pledge Sunday is a gift for anyone who yearns to swim free. Pledge Sunday is a gift for all of us who dare to claim Zacchaeus as our role model in faith, and place ourselves in the healing hands of Jesus when he calls, *"Hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today."*