

Reformation Sunday, also termed Presbyterian Heritage Sunday, is noted on my planning calendar for the year. Many congregations recognize this date with a tribute to aspects of this denomination's history. Recognizing our connection to the Scottish Dissenters with a Kirkin' o the Tartans service is one of these tributes. It began in a time of conflict over many issues. This service was the church blessing the clan tartans outlawed by the English and a symbol of their adherence to their convictions. Like the Reformation, this tradition points to times in the church's history when those of deep religious convictions were to be found standing up against the accepted structure of their world. The Reformation is usually said to begin with Martin Luther who nailed 95 statements about abuse practiced within the church. He placed these on the door of the Wittenberg church desiring to bring correction to the practices. These were accusations that the official stance of the church had been corrupted and was no longer following the teachings found in Scripture. This was meant to be a challenge which Luther wanted to debate in the church court because of his desire to change practices—to reform the church as an institution. Many of the accusations made by Luther had to do with the practice of confession, penance and the selling of absolution by the clergy. The church had elevated the practice of penance to that of a sacrament. Luther's understanding of the meaning of repentance was vastly different because he saw God's grace as the primary message. Our reading from Luke's gospel this morning is the beloved narrative of the wee little man Zacchaeus who climbed a sycamore tree in the town of Jericho as Jesus was walking by. I think most of us probably learned the song about Zacchaeus during our early childhood in Sunday school—along with the hand motions. It was a familiar story in Sunday school and at Vacation Bible School. What we probably didn't notice at the time was the narrative shifts in the story—as Jesus has gotten closer to Jerusalem. From not being able to tell where Jesus was located on his journey we now know exactly where he is—Luke 19: 1 “He entered Jericho and was passing through it.” Previously we have been told about a tax collector praying in the synagogue; we have been told about a rich young ruler who comes to Jesus with a question, and just on the outskirts of Jericho, Jesus heals a blind man. But none of them are given names. Zacchaeus is not only given a name, but an occupation and a physical description. He is not only a tax collector but a chief tax collector and is rich and short in stature. Because he is short in stature and a crowd is accompanying Jesus when Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus, he runs ahead and climbs a sycamore tree in order to be able to see. We often tell the story as Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus, but that's not exactly what Luke tells us. Zacchaeus, Luke says, was trying to see Who Jesus is. That's a little bit different from just wanting to see someone who is famous—and Zacchaeus is just watching from his perch in the tree until Jesus addresses him with an invitation to dinner—not for Zacchaeus to join him, but for him to come to Zacchaeus' house. In the text from last week we explored the status of tax collectors and their place in their society. They were agents of the oppressive Roman government and became rich by exploiting their neighbors. Last week, in the synagogue the tax collector was repentant and begging God to show mercy to him a sinner. Because of his understanding that he needed God, Jesus told his listeners who were described as ones who trusted in themselves, Jesus says that it was the repentant tax collector who left the synagogue justified. Now Jesus' invitation to Zacchaeus sparks grumbling among all those in the crowd. “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a

sinner.” they say. This and what follows when Zacchaeus speaks is usually viewed as a repentance story. We see Jesus seeking out Zacchaeus, a notorious rich chief tax collector who is overwhelmed by the presence of Jesus. Zacchaeus immediately repents of his sin and promises to make amends. Jesus, acknowledging Zacchaeus’ repentance then declares that salvation has come to this house. But there is a small issue with this simple view. Neither Jesus nor Zacchaeus says anything about sin or about repentance. Only the crowd mentions sin: the crowd who despises him for being an agent of Rome. When Jesus decides to go to Zacchaeus’ house they grumble, just as they have complained earlier when Jesus has chosen to eat with tax collectors and sinners. They object to Jesus’ choice of a companion for table fellowship. Zacchaeus has responded to Jesus’ request to be his guest and happily comes down from his perch in the sycamore tree. But when the crowd voices their opinion of him he says what our usual translations lead us to think of as his confession and statement of repentance. And the translations most often found in our text lead us to that conclusion by their use of the future tense in these statements. Verse 8: “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.’” But the tense of the both uses of the word for give in the Greek is the indicative present active first person singular according to the endings used in the original text. That would make the translation more like the one found in Young’s Literal Translation which reads: “And Zacchaeus having stood, said unto the Lord, 'Lo, the half of my goods, sir, I give to the poor, and if of any one anything I did take by false accusation, I give back fourfold.' That is a statement of current activity, not a promise for future behavior. When viewed in this light, the key to this story is not sin and forgiveness but sight. Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus, to see who he is. Because he is short he can’t see him, so he climbs a tree to be able to. This climbing of a tree is not behavior expected of any man, much less a rich one. But he climbs the tree, not to ask for forgiveness or mercy which is what we expect, but to see who Jesus is. When Jesus comes his way, Jesus looks up and sees him and invites himself to Zacchaeus’ house, not because Zacchaeus has asked for something but because he sees—really sees—him. Those in the crowd despise him as a sinner, yet Jesus names him a child of Abraham to whom salvation has come. Luke is the evangelist most sensitive to issues of money within the narrative he relates. Unfortunately he doesn’t give us easy theological boundaries. Often the rich are portrayed as sinful, not because of their wealth but because of their attachment to it. In the first century it was fairly common to assume that wealth was inherently good and a sign of God’s blessing. But Jesus has undermined that idea by saying that it is very difficult for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. And now we often assume that wealth is likely to be a sign of unscrupulous behavior. In this story Jesus has declared that Zacchaeus, this wealthy chief tax collector despised by his neighbors is also a child of Abraham, beloved of God, and a recipient of God’s salvation. Jesus doesn’t care so much about wealth as about what we do with our wealth and Zacchaeus is doing good things. This story is particularly apt on this day as we think about some of the tenets of our Reformed faith that although we proclaim them, we have trouble accepting them. It seems one of our most cherished Christian ideas is that repentance *always* precedes salvation. This order of things requires something from us in order to receive God’s gift. It is hard for us to believe that a sinner could receive salvation without first repenting. We usually assume since Jesus says, “Today salvation has come to this house” it must mean that Zacchaeus has repented. Jesus has singled Zacchaeus out to stay

with him, honoring him with his presence to the disgruntlement of the crowd. And then Jesus honors him a second time by accepting his statement about how he lives—affirming his righteous behavior despite what the crowd may believe by declaring that Zacchaeus is indeed a child of Abraham, one of the covenantal people, a beloved child of God, one of God’s own and living like it. The only thing that Jesus cares about is given in the last verse as Jesus’ own statement of his purpose: For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.” God cares about seeing and seeking out the lost and bringing them home again. God’s love and compassion overrides all of our sense of fairness or justice. That can be very upsetting because we often use our sense of justice or fairness as a way of defining each other, of keeping count, of keeping score, of following who’s in and who’s out. God’s story as revealed to us isn’t primarily about justice but about relationship, God’s deep, abiding, tenacious desire to be in relationship with each and all of us. At the heart of the Reformation begun by Luther was the recognition that he had been worshiping the wrong God. He was taught to see and fear a God of holiness and justice, a God who expected righteousness and punished those who could not meet that standard. Jesus, in this point of view was little more than the whipping boy, the one who stood in and took the beating we deserve, a substitute. Luther felt convicted of his sinful state and despaired. While agonizing over God’s righteousness, he finally realized that righteousness isn’t the standard God sets for us, but rather is the gift God gives to us. Righteousness isn’t a requirement, but a promise. The God Luther expected was all about justice, the God he met in Jesus was all about love. Jesus, it turns out, didn’t die to make God forgiving but died to show us how forgiving God already is. It is God’s grace alone that covers us. God sees us. God accepts us. God loves us. God brings us home. We expect and really want God to conform to our expectations of justice and fairness. The good news is that we don’t get the God we expect, but rather the one we need. Thanks be to God.