

Half? Four Times?
Luke 19:1-10

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What an odd text for All Saints' Sunday, don't you think?

Think of it: All Saints' is a day for remembrance and giving thanks for those saints who have departed from our midst in this past year, or any year, for that matter.

It is a somber day because we that remember death is real. It is a day when we declare with the simple phrase, *the church triumphant*, that those whom we love who have died have triumphed over death because of Jesus Christ. And yet even that can seem jarring as we remember, sometimes very presently, those who have departed from our midst have left us because they have *died*.

And along comes this story of Zacchaeus, whom some of you may remember was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he.

It doesn't really seem to fit the day. Couple that with the fact that we're in the midst of our annual commitment season and your pastor entitled his sermon with the amount Zacchaeus volunteered to give – half his possessions, and to return to any defrauded, four times what he took – and it can even appear just a bit convenient when the preacher has to talk about money and giving.

Except it's not convenient at all. I'm not really talking about money and giving today – not directly at least. You can draw your own conclusions. But as I considered what Zacchaeus has to say to us on All Saints' Sunday, I realized it was a very simple message – as simple as it could be, as a matter of fact, and here it is: Zacchaeus went all in.

I think sometimes that we live increasingly in a culture that pulls us away from being all in for any endeavor. It's a rare thing to get so caught up in a moment, in a movement that the end result of which is to say, "Yes, this is for me, and I'm going all in."

It's rare, I think, but it happens. It happens on the things that most matter to us.

Think of marriage – it is a moment, whether solemnized in a church sanctuary or under a trellis with roses around, or perhaps in another state because it's legal there, where a couple says, “That's it, this is it, there will be no others. There will only be you and me. We're all in.”

Of course, marriages do sometimes end, and sometimes they need to, but at the moment the commitment is made, it is a complete commitment.

But there's no changing baptism. Being baptized into the church is being baptized all in. There is no test run for baptism. It can't be undone.

I had a seminary professor, the late Donald Juel, a Lutheran minister, who for many years kept up a running torment of one of his best friends from high school. Dr. Juel was a New Testament scholar and his friend was a prominent lawyer and an atheist. Don would take singular pleasure, he said, in tormenting his friend, “Your parents had you baptized, Jerry. There's nothing you can do about it.”

“Don, I don't believe any of that nonsense. I realize you've dedicated your life to it, but I just don't believe it.”

“It doesn't matter – you've been baptized, you're recorded with the Saints, Jerry, whether you want to be or not!”

That's all in. Whether you want to be or not. There is no partial baptism. There is a before and an after.

That's not to say that God sees us in terms of baptized and not-baptized – I don't believe that for a second, but there is no liturgy for un-baptizing anyone. Once its done, it's done. It's all in.

Resurrection from the dead is all in. It is the fulfillment of our baptism.

We are going to read what is called the necrology report during the great prayer of thanksgiving today – which is to say that we are going to name the names of our loved ones that have died in the last year. We are naming them in the sure and certain knowledge that they are known to God. They are known to God who has gone all-in in the person of Jesus Christ for the redemption of the world.

We don't want any half-measure from God when it comes to that, do we? When it comes to the resurrection of the body we are stating the belief that when our days are done and our life has ended that we are so precious in God's sight that God will not let death have the last word.

God is always all in. That is how God is. That is who God is. God never takes a break from the sustaining work of creation. God never takes a break from the redemption of the world. That is good news.

We don't take comfort on days like All Saints' with a partial commitment. And God does not give a partial commitment. It's all in. Zacchaeus knew that.

Zacchaeus knew that to be brought into the community of faith, to join the communion of the saints was not a light thing. It was not a lark. It was not cheap.

He was decidedly on the outside. He was a tax collector. It wasn't any more popular then than it is now. I don't know if we have any IRS employees here at the church, I don't think we do, but I know there is a particular time of year where I wouldn't mention it if I were. I mean, I wouldn't go to Mardi Gras and go around telling people I'm a Presbyterian Minister, so I would think a tax collector in tax season would know what not to say.

And the crowd apparently agreed. Zacchaeus' gains were ill-gotten, they murmured. Who knows what the grumble was – he hasn't paid his dues – he's rich – he's different – does it really matter? They were just grumbling.

And that is when Zacchaeus went all-in. "Half my goods," he said, "I will give away." "If I have defrauded anyone, I will pay it back four times."

We have no idea whether Zacchaeus ever cheated anyone – his manner of answer suggests to me perhaps he didn't.

But he wanted to be all-in. This was the kingdom of God and he wanted to be all-in.

The good news of the Gospel is that God is always all in for us. Always.

What a difference that makes when we know it!

I received a book this past week that I read in a sitting. It was from my friend Barbara McMahon, who died after a 17 year long battle with lymphoma this summer. The book is entitled, How Lucky We Are, and it recounts her life and her battle with chronic illness. Toward the end she wrote, "Death is simply a part of the continuum of God's loving kingdom. In death, as in life, we are always in the hands of God, whose love will not let us go."¹ As I read it, I remembered our friends Ruthlyn and Grace who also battled chronic illness and ran their races well and finally came to the end of their lives, and in each instance, the saving grace that redeemed the struggle with illness and ultimately death was the knowledge that God was all in with them.

How do we sustain that knowledge?

In part, we sustain it at this table. We are sustained by God as we remember that when come to the table of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are joining in song, in Sanctus, with all the

¹ Barbara McMahon, How Lucky We Are, p191

faithful of every time and place. We are sustained as they are by a God who is all in, all the time.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.