

The Power of Conversation

by Linda Rex

October 30, 2022, PROPER 26—Have you ever had an unexpected, unplanned conversation with someone which totally changed your life? The other day, I was listening to the members of the Perichoresis ministry talk about how they met one another—a chance conversation here, a chance conversation there. Through all of these circumstances, God brought together people who shared a growing understanding of what it means that, in Christ, we are all included in God's Triune life and love.

One thing Jesus did a lot of while he walked the earth was have conversations with the people he met along the way. It seems he was always talking with somebody, and usually with people the leaders of his day believed he should have been avoiding. The conversations recorded in the gospels which Jesus had with everyday people often went deep, getting into places where people preferred not to go, asking them to do things they would have preferred not to do.

In Luke 18 is a story of a conversation Jesus had with a wealthy young ruler who asked Jesus what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. When Jesus responded as a good rabbi might have, telling him to observe the laws Moses gave, the young man responded by saying he had kept all of them from his childhood on. Then Jesus, seeing this person's heart and loving him, took him a little deeper, telling him to sell all he owned and to give the proceeds to the poor. This took the young ruler deeper than he was willing to go, causing him to turn and walk away.

At this point, Jesus told his disciples that it was difficult for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. This statement conflicted with the culture's belief that wealth was a sign of good favor with God, and poverty was a sign of affliction or punishment from God. Jesus said that wealth actually made it hard for people to enter the kingdom of God. The people of ancient Israel were the chosen people, already in the kingdom of God, the crowd thought, so this would have been a difficult statement to swallow. They said to Jesus, "How then can anyone be saved?"

Jesus' response was that what is impossible for human beings is possible with God. The saving of a rich man, or a poor one for that matter, was something only God could do. And, as he again told them, it required Jesus going through the crucifixion and death into resurrection. Jesus had no qualms about telling his disciples what it would cost in order for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God—it would cost Jesus everything.

Shortly after that event, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, asked Jesus to restore his eyesight. And he did—a task only the Messiah could do. And the result was that Bartimaeus chose to be a follower of Christ. Soon after, Jesus entered Jericho, where his Father, by the Spirit, was already at work in the heart and mind of a man named Zacchaeus.

This man was having difficulty, probably due to a short stature, with seeing which of the persons entering the city was Jesus. So he ran to a tree with low branches and climbed up to see more clearly. Looking to see who the man Jesus was, Zacchaeus was astonished to see him right below him and talking with him, telling him he was to stay at his house.

For a lot of people, in the culture I'm most familiar with—modern America—someone inviting himself or herself to stay at and eat in our home without our invitation would be considered a rude and presumptuous act, especially if we had no idea who the person was or why she or he was there. But in that culture, hospitality was the norm and was expected, and inviting someone to stay in your home was a necessity when there really were no other options for travelers.

What struck me this morning, though, about Jesus' request was something about the way in which he said it. In the New American Standard Bible, it says it this way: "Zaccheus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house." The New International Version says it like this: "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." Even the King James Version has the same vibe: "Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for today I must abide at thy house." Do you see it? Jesus is telling Zacchaeus he *must* stay at his house. Why?

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Whose idea was it for Jesus to stay at Zacchaeus' house? Who put it into Zacchaeus' heart and mind to climb that tree so he could see more clearly who Jesus was? It sounds to me like Jesus had a conversation with his Father in which he was told to have a conversation with Zacchaeus and to stay at his house. Apparently, the Holy Spirit had been working on this man's mind and heart, and had brought him to the place where he was seeking to learn more about Jesus. And then, as Jesus invited himself to his home, Zacchaeus discovered exactly what he had been looking for—a new start.

The crowd never seemed to be happy with Jesus' decisions about who he had conversations with. Perhaps they had planned to invite Jesus to a great banquet in the synagogue leader's home, where they could discuss the law and the prophets with him, and show off their new garments and flowery speeches and prayers. Who knows. But this idea of Jesus eating with someone so loathed by the Jews—a tax collector in league with the Romans, a thief who betrayed his people—was repellant to them all. So, the crowd grumbled.

But remember, what is impossible with us humans is possible with God. And Jesus was in sync with what his Father was doing. The Father had his eye on a rich tax collector who was looking for a new start, and he had been working with him to bring him to this place. So, Zacchaeus was the center of Jesus' focus and his home the place where he would eat and rest. And now, faced with the truth of his dishonesty and betrayal, Zacchaeus did an about face, offering restitution for every bit of money he had stolen, and a willingness to set aside his wealth and give it all to the poor—all of the things the rich ruler could not bring himself to do.

The Lord's been showing me lately the power of conversation, of the need to be present in each moment where he is at work. Often, we are so distracted we are not mindful of what is happening right in front of us, missing where God is at work and is inviting us to participate with him in what he is doing in someone's life. I am reminded that, first, my most significant conversations are with the Lord himself, listening for the Father's heart, and tuning in to the Spirit. When I am attentive to what God is up to, and then begin to participate in a conversation with someone else, God does things I cannot explain, that only he can do, especially with regards to bringing sons of Abraham back home to the kingdom of God.

What conversations might you find yourself in the midst of today? What might the Lord be wanting to say to you about them? Is there some impossibility he wants to make possible he would like you to be a part of? May you attentively live each moment in the middle of all God is doing, surprised daily by the wonder of what Jesus does by his Spirit in the lives of those you invite with you into conversation.

Dear Father, thank you for inviting us into conversation with you through Jesus in the Spirit. Who might you want us to speak with today? What is it you are doing, and how is it you want us to join in? Grant us the grace to be ever attentive to you and to what you are doing and saying, that we may keep in step with you and be surprised by joy as you bring others back home to you. Amen.

“With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith. We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.” 2 Thessalonians 1:(1–4), 11–12 NIV

“He entered Jericho and was passing through. And there was a man called by the name of Zaccheus; he was a chief tax collector and he was rich. Zaccheus was trying to see who Jesus was, and was unable because of the crowd, for he was small in stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree in order to see Him, for He was about to pass through that way. When Jesus came to the place, He looked up and said to him, ‘Zaccheus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house.’ And he hurried and came down and received Him gladly. When they saw it, they all began to grumble, saying, ‘He has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.’ Zaccheus stopped and said to the Lord, ‘Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.’ ” Luke 19:1–10 NASB

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