

## **“Dig Up Your Missing Identity”**

**Luke 19:1-10**

*Series: BELIEVE Week 5. Identity in Christ*

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The Woodside Church

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To celebrate the Bicentennial of our nation, the eighth grade graduating class of Hillview School, New Providence, New Jersey decided to go down in history – about three feet down. The class filled and buried a 14” x 14” metal time capsule on school grounds with instructions for it to be opened at some future date.

Forty school years fly by. More than a generation of children pass through Hillview’s halls. Two classmates named Doug and Lisa – a different Doug and Lisa – decide the future date has arrived. It is time to dig up the time capsule. Invitations scatter on Facebook. A reporter from the paper and a representative from the Historical Society show up. Classmates who’ve not seen each other in forty years appear. Best of all Carol Moldan, the Social Studies teacher who inspired the project, pin points the exact spot: “Outside my old classroom between two bushes.” So, armed with metal detector and shovel, I use the skills I learned digging ditches in the DR and Haiti and find...Nothing! We search the whole flower bed. Nothing. Someone says it is in the front of the school. We find nothing. Where is it? Probably below the new cement sidewalk under our feet.

What was in it? Ms. Moldan recites what she remembers: “A deflated basketball, a list of the students’ names, a Smiley Face button, the program from a Yankee game and a vinyl record of the class’ favorite rock group: The Beatles.” I must have stuffed the ballot box on that one. I didn’t want the future to remember us as the Disco Generation.

We never found the box. Yet we did dig up a Time Capsule – it was us. As we dusted off stories and dug up memories we uncovered our eighth grade selves. The friendships and cliques, the awkwardness and insecurities, the hopes for the future and the ghosts from the past. We also shared what happened in the four decades since then: the marriages and divorces, careers started, changed, and ended, children born and raised, grandchildren, parents grown old and gone. Even some of our classmates are no longer with us. When we graduated 8<sup>th</sup> grade our music teacher made us sing Diana Ross’ “Do You Know Where You’re Going To?” We didn’t know then. Now, 40 years later, we do.

That moment was especially poignant for me. The very hour I dug for the time capsule marked the completion of my fifty-fourth year on this earth. I was born that day in a hospital three miles away. My birthday often makes me reflect on where I’ve been and where I’m going to. So much of my identity was formed in the year we buried the time capsule. In 1976 I began to take guitar lessons, met my wife Lisa, gave my life to Jesus Christ and started on the journey to become a pastor. I dug up my identity.

The case of the missing time capsule made me ask that most fundamental question: Who am I? That is our key question this week in Believe. Psychologists say we begin to craft our identities during the teen years. Your identity is formed first by what

you are. In eighth grade we compared ourselves to one another. Who is tall/short, heavy/thin, nerd/jock, handsome/pretty/plain? These factors determine your worth. Later, your identity is shaped by what you do. At reunions people often evaluate one another by what they accomplish: what school did you attend, what degree did you earn, what job do you hold, what promotions did you receive, how many assets did you amass?

Here's the problem: when we measure our self-worth by what we are and what we can do, our identities become buried beneath the constant need to perform, please, and impress. Though we try to deny it: who I am and what I'm worth depends a great deal on what you and others think of me. It's like I'm an empty time capsule and I need you to fill me up. If you pump me up, I'm up. If you put me down, I'm down. And if I feel down about myself, I try to take you down with me. Trouble is, no matter how many ways I get you to fill up my identity, it's always empty. We spend so much time performing, pleasing, or putting others down, our true identity remains buried.

Today is the day to dig up your missing identity and find out who you really are. So far in Believe, we've opened the Bible to discover a God who embraces us as Father, Son and Spirit, a God who is involved in and cares about our lives, a God who so loves us He gives His life so we can have a life with Him now and forever. When I accept His invitation and enter this relationship it's like an archaeologist uncovering a long buried and forgotten treasure: my true identity. The key verse for this week confirms it:

Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. (John 1:12)

When we place our faith in Jesus Christ, when we enter this abundant relationship, God uncovers our hidden identity. We become beloved children of our Heavenly Father, children who are loved graciously, unconditionally, and eternally. What's more, we become children who don't have to prove anything. We don't need to waste so much energy performing, pleasing, impressing or putting others down. We don't need others to fill us up because we are filled to overflowing by the God who is Father, Son and Spirit.

Pastor, Author and Sociologist Tony Campolo says God is like a big Grandmother. He has pictures of all his loved ones, namely you, in this huge wallet and He goes around heaven bragging to the angels about you until they get sick of it. Now that I'm a grandfather, I see how others get sick when I talk about my children and grandchildren. But I can't help it. I love them. And in a greater sense, God so loves you. When that unconditional love gets inside you, it uncovers the buried you.

Case in point: Zaccheus. We'll read about him in Believe this week. Many of you learned about Zaccheus in Sunday School through a song. It goes like this: "Zaccheus was a *wee little* man, a *wee little* man was he." I bet Zaccheus is up in heaven stamping his foot and saying, "Will you stop calling me a *wee little* man!" Being below average in height is a disadvantage. *The Telegraph* of London ran a story with the headline: "Short man syndrome really does exist."

Oxford University scientists used virtual reality technology to reduce the height of volunteers and found feeling smaller makes people feel paranoid, mistrustful, scared of others and more likely to think people are staring or thinking badly about them. They felt incompetent, dislikeable or inferior. Professor Daniel Freeman said: "The results were very clear: lowering of height led to more negative evaluations of the self compared with others."<sup>1</sup>

On the positive side, another study found the shorter you are, the longer you live. On the negative side that means you get more years to feel bad about yourself.

Zaccheus may be a textbook case of short man syndrome. He probably tried to overcome inner inferiority by an outer show of strength. Tax collecting was his ticket to power. Until election day we'll hear a lot about taxes. Yet no matter how heavy your tax burden is it can't compare with what the Jews endured. Everything was taxed. All that money did not go to a government elected by you. It did not pay for your schools and social security. It went to the emperor and enemy soldiers who harassed and killed you.

The tax system was a huge pyramid scheme. With every tax collector at every level getting rich off the system you can imagine the tax burden crushing the poor Jews at the bottom. And one more thing – the tax collectors at the bottom levels were also Jews. They were the richest people in their communities. They were also scorned as traitors. Zaccheus was not just a tax collector. He was the chief tax collector. The whole district of Jericho was his domain. All the citizens feared him, obeyed him and hated him. To get to the top he must have made deals, cut corners, and step on his neighbors. The man of short stature achieved, by his own drive and determination, the highest stature in the region. Such power is a narcotic. Money does things for you. It opens doors, it turns heads, it gets people to do what you want.

But money also does things to you. You work more for it but enjoy it less. You want more of it, but never have enough. You think it will make your future secure, but you worry all the time about losing it. When money becomes your master instead of your servant, it makes you sacrifice all you hold dear: your values, your family, your soul.

After we failed to dig up the time capsule we had lunch and shared what we knew about other classmates. The richest most successful guy in our high school class is named Andy. At our twentieth high school reunion in 2000 many were impressed by how he accumulated power and wealth far beyond what we could imagine. The next year we heard how Andy – Andrew Fastow – was the number 3 man in the Enron Scandal. He eventually went to jail. Suddenly, all that wealth and power didn't seem so impressive.

Maybe Zaccheus was trying to impress people. Maybe he was trying to fill an empty identity. Yet all his power and money didn't win friends and influence people. It only isolated him. He's at the top of his game but it's a very lonely place to be.

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Knapton, *The Telegraph* 29 Jan 2014 "Short man syndrome really does exist, Oxford University finds" <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/science/science-news/10603195/Short-man-syndrome-really-does-exist-Oxford-University-finds.html>

Then he learns Rabbi Jesus of Nazareth will be passing through Jericho on his way to Jerusalem. He's heard of this rabbi's healings and miracles. His massive following is growing like a raging sandstorm. There are dangerous whispers that this Jesus thinks He is the Messiah. Zaccheus is intrigued by all this. But what catches his attention is a refrain repeated over and over: Jesus is "the friend of tax collectors and sinners." There is even a tax collector among his inner circle.

An overwhelming desire grabs hold of Zaccheus. He must see this rabbi. If he doesn't move fast, all he will glimpse is a wall of backs and shoulder blades. His curiosity drives him to do something completely crazy. Running ahead of the parade he climbs up into the branches of a sycamore tree. Perched in the crook of its branches, you wonder if Zaccheus gives any thought to how ridiculous he looks. The most wealthy, powerful, fearful Roman official in the district is now dangling from the branches like a little boy. But he's safe up there so long as no one stops and points him out.

Then the parade stops right under his tree and the one Zaccheus wants to see looks straight at him. And so does every eye below. I imagine at that moment the entire population of Jericho suddenly lets out one huge mocking laugh at the hated tax collector. Yet the mob doesn't attack him. They want to see what Jesus will do.

What Jesus does next shocks them all. He walks up to the base of the tree and called his name. "Zaccheus." One of the sweetest sounds in the world is when, instead of calling you names, someone calls your name – especially if it is someone you respect or someone you love. Jesus calls his name on purpose. 'Zaccheus' means "pure one, righteous one." Until now, those words were never used to describe the tiny tax collector. Jesus is the only one who sees Zaccheus' buried identity.

Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today. (Luke 19:5)  
There is an urgency in Jesus' voice as though someone's life depends on it. The crowd, for their part, recoils in angry grumbling.

All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner.'" (Luke 19:7)

Talking to a traitor is bad. Eating with him is worse. Going to his home? That's a sign of acceptance and approval. What has this small scoundrel done to deserve it? Nothing. Zaccheus is baffled himself. He has a decision to make. Does he stay in the tree and let the offer pass him by or does he come down? Somehow he senses that when he lets go of those sycamore boughs he will be letting go of his power and control. Yet when Jesus says his name and tells him to descend, Zaccheus feels like his true identity's been dug up after forty years underground.

So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. (At the house) Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount. Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this

house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.” (Luke 19: 6, 8-10)

Jesus does not change what Zaccheus is. He’s still a wee little man. Jesus does not change what Zaccheus does. He is still the chief tax collector after Jesus leaves. What Jesus does is call his name and uncover his true identity. He is not an outcast, ostracized traitor. He doesn’t need to please, impress or put others down. He no longer needs to worry how others see him or how he sees himself. He is a child of Abraham. He is a beloved child of God. And for Zaccheus, this changes everything. He is now free to live up to his name: the pure and righteous one.

Jesus is calling your name. He wants to remove the years of accumulated dirt: the attempts to perform, please and impress others. He wants to dig up your missing identity as a son or daughter of God. Now you know this. Yet research tells us only 13% of people in our churches believe this is true. Your identity is not based on your performance but on your position as a child of God. You are somebody because you are a child of the Ultimate Somebody. If, like Zaccheus, you live according to your new identity it will radically change the way you approach each day. If you are filled with your Father’s love, you don’t need to get it from others. If you are filled with God’s love, you can live to give it away and bless others.

That’s what happened to Zaccheus. When Jesus becomes your Master, money becomes His servant.

- He was free to **Share** – He gave away 50% of his possessions.
- He was free to **Care** – He gave them to the people he once oppressed – the poor.
- He was free to be **Fair** – He worked according to God’s standards and beyond it. The law required full restitution plus a 20% penalty. Zaccheus did not return a 120% but 400%.

This week, as you pray about what you will commit to God’s work at Woodside in 2017, ask God to set you free to share and care for others. Ask God to uncover your true identity and let His love and generosity flow out of you to others. You’ve been working your way to a tithe, ten percent, for a long time. Now is the time to let go and give.

Gold is pretty impressive. Gold gets your attention. Yet Michael Phelps, the most gold decorated Olympian in history found it wasn’t enough. During the 2016 Rio Olympics ESPN announced Phelps had an identity crisis in 2014. He didn’t know who he was out of the pool. Heavy drinking and a couple of DUIs led him to wonder if life was worth living. "I thought the world would just be better off without me," Phelps admitted. "I figured that was the best thing to do — just end my life." After checking into a treatment center Phelps found hope when he started reading Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life*, which uplifted him so much so that he was nicknamed "Preacher Mike" by fellow patients, since he would often read to them from the book.

His story parallel's another pair in the Olympic pool: David Boudia and Steele Johnson. After flipping and twisting their way to a silver medal in the synchronized diving competition, they told NBC:

When my mind is on diving and I'm thinking I'm defined by this, my mind goes crazy, but we both know that our identities are in Christ. – David Boudia

Knowing that my identity is rooted in Christ and not in the competition, whatever the result might be, I can just enjoy the experience. – Steele Johnson.

Let Jesus dig up your true identity so you can enjoy the experience of life.