
Are we there yet?
Chapel in the Park United Church
June 14, 2026
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Luke 19:1-10

Some of you may be confused by the title of this reflection. “Are we there yet?”. The title suggests that we are on a journey. But are we on a journey? Well, let’s see, shall we?

But first, we need to discuss our reading from Luke about Zacchaeus. So who was Zacchaeus? We are told that Zacchaeus was the chief tax collector, and was rich. And ever since Sunday School we have been told that in Jesus’s day, tax collectors were not paid for their work. So they over-charged people and pocketed the difference. Tax collectors figured out who had money and squeezed them for cash. And apparently Zacchaeus was good at his job, because he was rich.

So those are the basics of the story. But the story has some surprises too.

One surprise is that Jesus calls Zacchaeus by name. That suggests that Jesus and Zacchaeus already knew each other. The story does not mention that. And there are other clues. For example, after Jesus comes to his home, Zacchaeus launches into a confession to Jesus and instantly offers to give half of his possessions to the poor and to pay back anyone he has defrauded. Where did that come from? The story does not say that Jesus accused Zacchaeus of being a crook. Jesus had not denigrated Zacchaeus’s character or his occupation. Why did Zacchaeus spontaneously make his generous offer? There must be some history between Jesus and Zacchaeus. We just do not know what it is.

Another surprise ... notice while Zacchaeus is still up the tree, Jesus says, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” Jesus established his relationship with Zacchaeus up front - with no conditions. Jesus did not say ... you know, if you give some money away people will like you again and I then I can come to your house. Nope. Jesus declares that Zacchaeus is part of the community first - while Zacchaeus was still up a tree.

So why did Zacchaeus make his generous offer? What did he get out of it? What

he gets is that he is welcomed back into the community. As a tax-collector, Zacchaeus was rejected by his own community. In this story, he is referred to as “one who is a sinner”. But Jesus declares that Zacchaeus is welcomed back into the fold. Zacchaeus belongs. Zacchaeus is welcomed back into the community.

In Jesus’s day, the Jewish community was pretty good at shunning people and excluding them from the community. The fan favourites being lepers and tax collectors. The story of Zacchaeus most closely resembles the healing of a leper. Lepers and tax collectors were ejected from their own communities. And the healings that Jesus offered was to invite the person back into community.

Unlike in the stories about lepers, Zacchaeus had to participate in his own redemption. He offered money for the poor and for anyone he had stolen from. My own personal take on this story is that Jesus and Zacchaeus had perhaps discussed this before. Zacchaeus knew why he had been ejected from his community. And Zacchaeus finally decided that belonging was more important than holding onto his wealth. Zacchaeus distributed his wealth - not out of guilt. But simply because that is what community looks like.

Zacchaeus participated in a system that extracted wealth from his own community with no thought to the relationships that destroyed. He accumulated wealth by taking advantage of his own community. He did not design the system. But he benefited from it. He was a person who valued money over relationships. Happily, in our story today, Zacchaeus - in the end - decides that relationships are more important than money. And he makes amends. Unasked. Not driven by guilt, but driven by his own need to be in community once again.

And that reminds me of a journey that we are all on. Which is why I asked, “are we there yet?” Because I honestly do not know where each of us are on this journey. Because today is the annual celebration called “Indigenous Day of Prayer”. And in many ways, Zacchaeus was like a colonial settler. We need to talk about Indigenous issues in Canada.

I want to open this discussion with an apology. This is Rev Paul speaking of course, not Shane. I want to apologize on behalf of the United Church of Canada for the

way in which we have discussed Indigenous issues in Canada.

Granted, we have done some good things too. The United Church was heavily involved in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission work that culminated in the TRC report in 2015 that included the 94 Calls to Action. That work lifted up the realities of the Indigenous Residential School System that operated in Canada from 1880 to 1996. The United Church paid its share of the financial compensation that was given to survivors of residential schools. We have done good things.

My apology is based on the way that Indigenous issues were communicated. Because many United Church members heard a message about guilt and the need to be forgiven. Not a message about relationship and reconciliation. Which was unfortunate because the message we need to hear is about relationships and reconciliation.

Our intentions came from a good space. Starting prior to 2015 ministers preached about the history of residential schools. I myself went to Ottawa to participate in the Truth and Reconciliation events held there in 2015. We have introduced Land Acknowledgements. We have educated. We have prayed. We have “walked with” Indigenous partners at events like the Grassy Narrows River Run and the Moose Hide Campaign Day. We have cried together.

But when I reflect on what members of the church have said to me, I feel like I have not done enough. Or perhaps I have not done the right things. And I’m not speaking about anyone here at Chapel in the Park United Church. I’m speaking about many people I have known over many years in many different congregations since I entered professional ministry.

One member I recall responded to any discussion of Indigenous issues saying, “haven’t we don’t enough already?” I recall another member who said that we should write one more cheque to Indigenous people and after that, he never wanted to hear about Indigenous people ever again.

Sometimes when we discuss Indigenous issues, what people in the pews hear is that we should feel guilt for something which we did not personally do. And since we have offered compensation to Indigenous people in a variety of ways, that they just need to get over it. Sometimes the message that people hear is that we have moved on, so why

can't Indigenous people move on too.

And for that, I apologize. Because the church has sometimes presented Indigenous issues as issues for which we need forgiveness. But what we actually need is reconciliation. And forgiveness and reconciliation are not the same thing. At all.

Consider forgiveness. Forgiveness is when we release our need to control another person, or we release our need to fix a situation from our past. Forgiveness is when we are ready to let go of our anger. Forgiveness is often one-sided. We can forgive another person whether or not they apologize. We can forgive another person whether or not they feel remorse. We can forgive another person whether or not they are even alive. Forgiveness is often one-sided.

But reconciliation is fundamentally a two-way street. Because reconciliation is about restoring relationship. And relationships by their very nature are two-way.

So perhaps the church not been clear enough about the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. And that has led to many misunderstandings.

One problem is what I hear behind the message, "haven't we done enough already?" Because that attitude suggests that we are just engaging in a transaction. We provide compensation and then Indigenous people should grant us forgiveness. Like cattle-trading. And sadly, because we have offered compensation in a variety of ways, some church members are sitting back now and waiting for a statement of forgiveness from Indigenous groups. As if we now want to be released from our collective guilt.

But our need to feel absolved from our guilt feels like we still want the centre-stage here. Indigenous issues then become focused on our own needs. That is a very colonial way to look at it. Surely the question cannot simply be about our needs. Waiting for and demanding forgiveness from Indigenous people is like a second harm. The first harm was from the residential school system. A second harm comes from us believing that all that we need is a transaction with Indigenous people and they should just hurry up about their end of the bargain.

Because what we actually need is to be in relationship with Indigenous people. What we need is to be in community. Together. What we need - perhaps - is to be more like Zacchaeus ourselves.

Zacchaeus knew that he was rejected by his community. As far as we can tell, Jesus never told him that he had to change his behaviour. As far as we can tell, Jesus never tried to dump any guilt on to Zacchaeus. But Zacchaeus knew that he was considered an outsider because he took advantage of his own community. And so Zacchaeus choose to make amends. He chose - unasked - to give half his money to the poor. He chose - unasked - to give back to anyone he had de-frauded. And in the process, Zacchaeus became - once again - part of the community. He did not hand out money because of guilt. He did so because that is what being in community required.

Did Zacchaeus get to the point of saying, one more cheque and I can forget all about these people. No! Did Zacchaeus say, "I'm all done now"? No! Zacchaeus did not get to finish the job of restitution. What he got ... was to be in relationship. Period. And that was enough. Perhaps that is still enough for us today.

So - how to we get into relationship with Indigenous people? Some of us already are. I have Indigenous friends. I assume that others of us also do as well. Indigenous people are present in all of our communities. One-on-one relationships with Indigenous people are at our finger-tips.

Having said that, relationship with Indigenous people is not something we can manufacture on demand. But we can put ourselves in places where those relationship becomes possible

I am so delighted that Chapel in the Park (and Chapel in the Basement) visited the Woodland Cultural Centre on the grounds of the former Mohawk Institute in Brantford last summer on our bus trip. We strolled through the Indigenous market. We toured the museum. We spoke with Indigenous people at the market.

And I don't want to complicate our summer. But I want to invite us back to the Woodland Cultural Centre sometime. Because when we were there last time, the former residential school was closed for renovations. But it has now opened as a museum that we can tour. We can now tour the school. To hear the stories of the students. To feel the space. To be present.

Perhaps when we do go there we will leave any guilt we carry outside. And feel invited to simply enter the building. Just as Jesus entered Zacchaeus's home. To enter the

building and breathe the air. Not to feel bad about it. But simply to be present. And perhaps, to ask questions we have not been willing to ask ourselves before.

Are we there yet? Are we on a journey towards reconciliation and community?
Are we doing our best to be on a journey of reconciliation with Indigenous Canadians?
Are we? One thing I do know. If we are on a journey of reconciliation ... then we are not there yet. Because reconciliation was never about the destination. Reconciliation is about the journey itself. I pray that we all travel well.

Amen.