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Sermon Title: God's Mulligan
Scripture: Luke 19:1-10
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Luke 19:1-10

Jesus and Zacchaeus

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax-collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.' So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.' 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.' Then Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.'

Sony died yesterday. That may not mean anything to you now, but bear that in mind as we go through the sermon. Sony died yesterday.

There is good and bad in all of us. Health and sickness, ups and downs. In all of us. Jesus seemed to understand that completely. At one point, Jesus said, "Be ye perfect, even as God in heaven is perfect." But we are not. So he proceeded to head for the cross to die for us. Because we are not perfect. Never were, never will be. Jesus demands our perfection, yet he prepared for our imperfection. We are God's own ... what is it? A paradox wrapped in an enigma. Perfectly imperfect to perfection.

Alida and I enjoyed two quick days in New York City. We went to the Frick Collection, a first for both of us, we are sad to admit. Frick was one of the

great industrialists of the early 20th century, and he amassed a most extraordinary collection of great paintings by the old masters. Several Rembrandts, some breathtaking Vermeers, a lot of Whistlers, throw in a Renoir and a Dégas, a Van Dyke; Turners and El Grecos, all scattered about the walls and above the fireplace of his great mansion.

We began our tour in the music room with a 10-minute film to introduce us to Henry Clay Frick. It turns out that good old Mr. Frick was partners with Andrew Carnegie in arranging a violent battle with Pittsburgh's steel workers out on strike. According to the film at the Frick (a film made by the Frick), Mr. Frick's reputation in Pittsburgh was so bad that he fled to New York City, bought up an entire city block on Fifth Avenue and 70th Street, built his mansion, installed his art, and left it in trust to be a museum. Quite a record. Quite a transformation. In reputation, in purpose, in legacy.

If I understood the subtleties of the Frick's film correctly, I was about to enjoy a lovely afternoon nestled among some of the world's great art, thanks to a guy who exploited his workers, abused their rights, and ended up being hated in his own hometown! And who, at the same time, was a visionary, a benefactor, cultured and generous.

There is good and bad in all of us. As I was thinking about today's sermon, I ran through a whole bunch of famous Biblical characters, looking for one who was good from one day to the next. Paul? Nope. He killed Christians before he became one. Peter? He denied Christ before preaching Christ. Thomas? He doubted before he believed. Elijah wanted to quit. Moses wanted to run away. Abraham hid behind his wife's skirts. King David? Nope. He failed as a husband, king, and father. Other than that, he was terrific! Yet all of them are in the Biblical Hall of Fame. They're all good guys because they got a second chance, a third chance, a seventh chance, a 222nd chance – however many chances it took to get things right.

You saw my sermon title, "God's Mulligans." We live in a golf-crazy community. If I needed to find many of you on a Saturday morning (and sometimes on a Sunday), I could just run over to the Patterson Club, down to Smith Richardson, over to Brooklawn, down to the Par 3. Many of you go on golf vacations and to golf schools. So I don't even pretend. People ask me if I golf, and I say, "I spent my life trying to hit a baseball about four times the size of a golf ball, and that was frustrating enough. So, no, I have never golfed!" Which is not exactly true.

A dear man took me golfing once, where I was introduced to the "mulligan," a gentlemanly "do-over." When a klutzy hacker like me hits a ridiculously awful shot that goes nowhere, nice people let me do it over. A "mulligan."

Well, I shot a 90 that day! Ninety permissible shots that counted. Ninety mulligans that were forgotten. A total of 180. But 90 were forgiven. "What a Christian game," I thought, "full of grace and forgiveness and nice people!" Whether your golf foursomes match that standard of Christian behavior or not, you get the point. Our God is a God of mulligans, do-overs, and many chances.

Our Scripture lesson today is the quite lovely story of Zacchaeus, especially lovely if you're the kind of person, like me, who needs the occasional mulligan in life. Let's face it: Zacchaeus was a louse. The Bible calls him a "tax collector," but that doesn't do justice. He was a traitor. Israel had been conquered by Rome. Israel was being squeezed dry by Rome for taxes and profit. And Zacchaeus, an Israeli, worked for the enemy. He squeezed his own people dry, giving Rome what it wanted, lining his own pockets along the way. He was a traitor, a cheat. He was hated, despised, ostracized. But when Jesus came to town, something in Zacchaeus wanted to see him. So he hid up in a tree near where Jesus was walking by. He wanted to see Jesus. What he didn't count on was that Jesus could see him. I mean *really* see him, see right through him. Jesus looked at Zacchaeus, and he could see the rottenness; he could see the corruption, the meanness, and the deadness.

No big deal. Everyone in that town could see all of that! But Jesus could see more. Jesus looked at Zacchaeus, and he could see hunger, yearning, want, need, desperation. He could see a desire to change. To be a different person, to make amends, to do better. This was a guy who needed a mulligan, but mulligans hadn't been invented yet. That's what Jesus was there for. So Jesus called out to Zacchaeus, "Come down out of the tree! I must stay at your house today." I like that. I must stay... I must stay at your house today. People were shocked, appalled, disgusted. Everyone knew Zacchaeus was a man who would walk over his grandmother to achieve his goals.

That reminds me, Charles Colson died last month. He was President Nixon's "mastermind of dirty tricks." according to the *New York Times* April 21, 2012, obituary. Colson actually said of himself that he would "trample his grandmother's grave for Nixon." And he ended up being jailed for his Watergate-era crimes and obstruction of justice. (Wiener, Tim. "Charles W. Colson, Watergate Felon Who Became Evangelical Leader, Dies at 80." *The New York Times* 21 Apr. 2012. Print.)

I remember it as a very happy day. One of the bad guys got his! Yippee! I wasn't much of a Christian then. I didn't know how this "mulligan" thing worked. You know how sometimes we get so fed up with someone that we just blurt out, "Go to hell!" It's sort of the perfect drop-dead end of

argument. "You're dead to me, get out of my face" sentiment, with a nice dastardly theological touch. "Go to hell." Except, God is standing there saying, "Wait a minute. Not so fast! Hell isn't my place. It belongs to someone else, so why would I want my customers going to some other place? So stop with the 'Go to hell' nonsense. Let me start over with this guy."

So God did the same thing to Chuck Colson that Jesus did to Zacchaeus. "I'm coming after you. I must stay at your house ... even if your house is The Big House." God entered Colson's life, and when Colson got out of prison, he devoted the rest of his life to mulligans for others. He established radical prison ministries, seeking radical prison reform, because the work of redemption, the work of changed lives requires radical action.

I found a companion story to this in *The Boston Globe*. It was about the retirement of the chief probation officer of the Dorchester Court in Boston. People credit him with transforming the system and thereby transforming lives. And by the way, don't dismiss him as some mushy headed, wishy-washy, touchy-feely liberal. He made his reputation by being tough. He went after probation-breakers with surprise nighttime visits to where they were supposed to be and where they weren't supposed to be. And what he discovered is his probationers welcomed the intrusion! Like Zacchaeus, they wanted to be seen. Like Colson, they needed to be found. Mr. Fitzgerald, this retiring Chief Probation Officer, summed up his philosophy: "You have to believe in redemption." *You have to believe in redemption*. Mulligans. Do-overs. Second chances. (Harmon, Lawrence. "Believe in Redemption." *The Boston Globe* 12 May 2012. Print.)

Remember Sony, from the beginning of my sermon? Sony did this week. If you read my book *Christlikeness*. You remember the story. Sony was a little girl in India left by her parents under a tree at our FOCI hospital. Witnesses remembered seeing her parents having tea, with the baby in their arms, and then they disappeared, leaving Sony to our care. Sony was the most severely multi-disabled person I have ever seen. At that time she was about 6 or 7 years old, but a teeny tiny, tiny little girl. Sony could do nothing. Not sit, not walk, not talk, not move. So FOCI took her in. Sony could do one thing perfectly: she could receive our love. Year after year after year, for 14 years, FOCI students and FOCI visitors met Sony, touched her, held her, played with her, told her stories, supported her, loved her. From the beginning, I have avoided saying, "Her parents abandoned her." We don't believe they abandoned her. We believe they gave her to us. They tried the best they could for a long time to care for their daughter. It was beyond them. And so they gave her a second chance with us. And our people, our money, our hospital, our mission work, our church gave her all

the fullness of love we could. And now God gives Sony the fullness of life. Perfected, whole, joyful.

That's our mission work at its best. And that's Greenfield Hill Church at its best. What's ASP? What's Operation Hope? What's Pivot House? What's this church Sunday after Sunday after Sunday after Sunday? Broken hearts. Broken dreams. Broken promises. Broken houses. Broken lives. Broken health. Broken faith. Brokenness all around. We could just leave them all where they are. Maybe they deserve it. Bad choices. Bad genes. Bad luck. Bad habits. Bad parents. Bad decisions. Tough luck. Go to hell. And guess what? I can find you plenty of religion to back that up, plenty of popular opinion, plenty of politics, plenty of churches and Christians and preachers.

I bet you know people, even church people, who don't like this mulligan/forgiveness stuff. They prefer guilt, revenge, grudges. But let me make it really clear with two statements:

1. That isn't Jesus.
2. That isn't Greenfield Hill Church.

Here we are - a mulligan, do-over, start-fresh, forgiven and forgiving people.

Thank God.