

Respect (We Must) Manuscript  
St. Luke's UMC – 10/20/24

In 1967, a psychology researcher named Paul Ekman traveled to Papua New Guinea to study the Fore people. This was a society of people who, until 1950, had virtually no contact with the outside world. This trip was part of Ekman's research to identify a universal set of basic human emotions. He found 6. 6 emotions that all humans share the exact same set of facial expressions for: fear, anger, surprise, happiness, sadness, and disgust. In 1986, Ekman uncovered a 7<sup>th</sup>. It's called contempt.

My personal adventures with contempt began in my therapist's office when she suggested I read a book for people who struggle with contempt. I thought it was a fancy therapist word for anger. I ordered the book and promptly didn't read it, because I am a human being and that's what we do sometimes.

But a couple weeks later, I heard of a study by the Gottman Institute, where they used Ekman's work to code facial expressions of married people during an interaction. They wanted to see if they could predict marital outcomes based on tracking facial expressions alone. And wouldn't you know, one of the facial expressions that proved an important indicator about how a marriage partnership would go, was the facial expression of contempt. Oh, I think I heard of a book about that. I didn't pick it up yet, but I did type into Google, "facial expression for contempt."

And this is what came up. (*photo of "contempt" facial expression*)

Lip corner tightened and raised on one side. Interestingly, the only asymmetrical facial expression we all make. So I saw it, and I tried it on. And. Woof. So familiar. So I Googled further, I found this isn't just a therapist word for anger. This is a different thing, and truly the definition matches the expression. It's that feeling for "I'm up. You're down." Whoever the person is, whatever the idea is, on the other side of this emotion, you are better than them. You are above it. It is lower than you. They are not worth your thought or care.

The story that was read today from Luke 19:1-10, has a lot of up and down in it.

Zacchaeus, he's a wee little man. He's *physically lower*. Then, Jesus comes to town and Zacchaeus can't see him, because, short, so he *climbs up* into a tree. Then, Jesus sees him and says, *come down* out of the tree.

Not only is this story about actual levels of height, there's also a lot for us to get curious about here when it comes to levels of contempt and, I would say it's opposite: respect. And this is a good time for us, as a people in America, to be getting curious about contempt, respect, and how Jesus navigates these things.

Zacchaeus was a Jewish man. He's name literally translates to "righteous" or "clean." But we're told here, he is also the chief tax collector in this area. So for the people

surrounding Jesus in this story, Zacchaeus is anything but righteous or clean. He is scum. (5 min)

Though Jewish himself, Zacchaeus was representing the Romans: the occupying outside force against the Jewish people. They also had to pay Zacchaeus their taxes with coins stamped with the saying "Caesar is god," which was considered idolatry. Besides all this, these tax collectors often charged exorbitant fees, over and above what was owed to Rome, and lined their own pockets with it. Everyone knew it. And Zacchaeus, he's not only one of that-kind-of-people, but he's also the CHIEF of those kind of people. Are they even people? A puppet. A dog. Lower than low.

And then, he dares climb up a tree.

The song about Zacchaeus being a wee little man sort of steals the gut-punch of this story from us a little. This wasn't silly. This was an enemy. This was a liar and a snake. This was a traitor who cared nothing for families who couldn't feed their children. Who laughed in God's face. How dare he? How dare he climb up a tree?

Can you feel it? Who would you just hate to see up there?

I had a supervisor tell me once, when I was a young adult, one of my first jobs, something that has been trying to change my life ever since. I was complaining about a coworker. Going on and on because uuuuggghhhh they were just one of those GUYS, you know? One of those people who always had to make sure everyone knew how much smarter and better they were.. And I'd just HAD IT. I was so angry! LIKE, ENOUGH. HE ALWAYS ACTING LIKE HE'S SO MUCH BETTER THAN ME!

And my supervisor looked at me and said, "I wonder why that would bother you so much, why it feels so unfair, unless you think maybe you're the one who is better than him?"

Contempt.

The same therapist who recommended the book, which I DID, in fact, end up reading, often warned me in a similar way: be careful, Kylee. Be careful not to become what you hate.

Contempt.

Contempt is this high contrast emotion that turns everyone else into 2 dimensional figures and ourselves into heroes, and we have to be careful or the very people we are raging against treating us so poorly...misunderstanding, ignoring, looking down on... are at home with our name on their lips as the ones who are doing the exact same thing to them.

Contempt.

It's not how Jesus sees Zacchaeus. Jesus' lip doesn't turn up. His face does. He turns his face up and he asks Zacchaeus to come down out of the tree.

Luke 19:5-6 *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." 6 So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.*

In Jewish culture during Jesus' time, sitting down at a table with someone signified a deep level of trust, acceptance, and unity. If you sat down at someone's table, you were considered part of their family, under their protection. Being invited to someone's table was a sign of respect and belonging. The table was a symbol of community, unity, shared life together.

Offers of that kind of hospitality, then, you can see, were highly valued. And hosting a renowned teacher would be an honor for Zacchaeus. But, what Jesus does here, it's still not normal. Even if you're a big deal, you don't just invite yourself to this level of intimacy with a stranger. But Jesus does. In fact, he says, "I MUST."

I must stay at your house today.

I must sit at your table.

I must meet you, Zacchaeus, not as someone below me, not as someone above me, but as someone across the table from me.

I said before that contempt is a high contrast emotion. It's black or white. Good or bad. Zacchaeus, I'm sure, did some bad things. Me too. You too. But is that really all we are? All we'll let each other be? Is that all our neighbor is with the wrong political sign in their yard or the wrong stupid hat?

What Jesus does here isn't contempt. It's respect. Respect, is different. Respect looks up in the tree and sees Zacchaeus not only as a man who has done some bad things, but also as a man who would run to climb up a tree to get one glimpse of Jesus. Who would, without hesitation, say YES to Jesus' self-announced visit. Who, as soon as he can, vs. 8:

Luke 19:8 *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."*

Does his part in leveling the ground. Where he is rich, he is giving to the poor. Where he has stolen, he is giving back.

In this story, respect leads to respect. Love leads to love. If you go forward one chapter in Luke, you can read about the Rich Young Ruler. Jesus respected him too. It didn't bring change at all. I'm telling you that so we can all remember, this isn't a formula about how to get people to be who we think they should be.

Don't miss it. This isn't a story about how we or anyone else should act, this is a story about who we are. Who we are becoming.

This is a story that invites us to pause when we see somebody we hate up in a tree and our lip curls up and we think "IDIOT!"

This is a story that invites us to ask ourselves, why am I so mad? Why am I so bothered? Have I made this person 2 dimensional? What would it mean, instead, to meet them at a table?

Again, not because I should. We can do things motivated by what we should do about 6 times. Then we're out of juice.

No, what would it mean, to meet this person at a table, because that's where Jesus invited me? Because that's where God changes me? Because that's where God can change US into something more like love?

How do we do it? Part of the answer is: I don't know. Walk down a road, look for people in trees. The other part of your answer is in your bulletin today, or if you're watching online... It's a resource from Resurrection United Methodist Church called The Dignity Index.

- 8 "Each one of us is born with inherent worth, so we treat everyone with dignity – no matter what."
- 7 "We fully engage with the other side, discussing even values and interests we don't share, open to admitting mistakes or changing our minds."
- 6 "We always talk to the other side, searching for the values and interests we share."
- 5 "The other side has a right to be heard. It's their country too."
- 4 "We're better than those people. They don't really belong. They're not one of us."
- 3 "We're the good people and they're the bad people. It's us vs. Them."
- 2 "Those people are evil and they're going to ruin our country if we let them. It's us or them."
- 1 "They're not even human. It's our moral duty to destroy them before they destroy us."

It's an engine check light for you. Contempt is one of the 7 universal human emotions. We don't need to be afraid, we just need to be aware. We can begin to listen to ourselves, our internal dialogue, and use it as a guide for when we may need to recenter and redecide who we want to be. This is a tool to help our awareness.

The back of this index also has some guideposts for us as we build the skill of having respectful conversations. We are in a hot season. The temptation to get 2-dimensional will be strong. We have another choice. Here are some skills you can develop.

♥ **Be curious, *not furious***

Try to learn more about a person and their views.

♥ **Regulate, *then debate***

When you start to get upset, pause and take a breath before speaking.

♥ **Listen to hear, *not to respond***

Intentionally listen to understand the other person's beliefs.

♥ **Challenge ideas, *not the value of the person***

Speak your truth and do it with dignity.

♥ **Acknowledge *knowledge***

Recognize when someone makes an interesting or logical point.

♥ **Build up rather than *tear down***

Advocate, explain and build up your idea rather than attack others' ideas.

I want to end today in the middle, when Jesus says, "I must." He says this not because he has something to check off his to-do list, but because it is who Jesus is. He can't not. Love compels him to reach out, to lean in, to invite Zacchaeus to a place of respect. May it be the same for us.