

Sunday April 2, 2017

Luke 18:31-19:10

This week, in my research on the biblical passage, **I learned about Shrodinger's Cat.**

It never ceases to amaze me how seemingly far off the beaten track I often go to make sense of the biblical reading, or to find a different way of seeing it ... but there you have it. Me, a proven failure in every mathematics, physics, or chemistry class I ever took in high school, trying to understand quantum physics. But, it does have relevance to the reading today, which I will get to eventually, so bear with me.

Some of you, no doubt, will know the theory well, but for those like me who didn't, **here is Sheldon from the Big Bang Theory trying to explain Shrodinger's Cat to Penny.**

Video:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HCOE_N6v4o

I first read about this from Pastor Dennis **Sanders, who writes:** "If you read or watch enough

science fiction or comic books, you will run into the multiverse. **It's the belief or theory that there isn't one universe, but hundreds or thousands of different universes all taking place at the same time.** There is the famous thought experiment [which means it was **never carried out, but was just a "thought"**], by Erwin Schrodinger where he talks about a cat being placed in a box with a small amount of a radioactive substance, a hammer and cyanide. ... as long as the box is closed, **we don't know if the cat is alive or was killed by the poison.** In theory, the cat could be both alive and dead at the same time.

This experiment has been used to explain multiverses because you can be a famous singer in one universe or a serial killer in another one all at the same time ... **I've thought about multiverses in thinking about a tension in today's text.** There are two different understandings when it comes to the tax collector named Zacchaeus."¹

So, that was my entry point this week into the world of **Shrodinger's Cat, and the multiverse.** If you want to learn more – as you would expect, there is a

¹ <https://comesundaydoc.org/2017/03/31/zacchaeus-and-the-multiverse-lent-5/>

ton of stuff on the internet. I had a hard time picking which youtube video to show to best explain the theory, **and the implications, of Shrodinger's** Cat.

The story of Zacchaeus is probably one most of us know well if we grew up in the church. The story of wee little Zaccheus, a hated tax collector who probably cheated people, who wanted to get a glimpse of Jesus as he was passing by, so climbed up a tree to see him. **And then Jesus said "Zacchaeus, come down, I'm going to your house for lunch!"**

And I grew up hearing the story that this encounter with Jesus was a point of transformation for Zacchaeus, who promised from now on to give half his money to the poor, and never to cheat people again.

That's been the traditional way the story has been interpreted, and presented to us. A classic story of repentance.

But this week, in the world of the multiverse, I learned about an alternate reality. Many commentators are revisiting that traditional interpretation, and the reason is this, according to David Lose:

"Contrary to most contemporary translations (including both the NRSV and NIV), the tense of the verbs in Zacchaeus' declaration are present, rather than future. That means Zacchaeus isn't pledging, "Look, half of my possessions I *will* give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I *will* pay back four times as much." Rather, Zacchaeus is boasting (probably in response to the grumbling of the crowd), "Look, half of my possessions I *give* to the poor...[and] I *pay* back four times" -- as in right now, already, as a matter of practice.

So what's going on with the variant translations? Well, it turns out those who translate the verbs as future oriented appeal to a grammatical category called a present-future tense ... the *only* occurrence of this verb tense is Luke 19:8. Yes, that's right: rather than translate this sentence in the present tense -- which of course would muck up interpreting this as a repentance scene -- translators have actually *created* a new grammatical category that occurs once and only once to justify their theological interpretation and bias."²

² <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1556>

Zacchaeus actually means “innocent” or “blameless”. Another commentary said “pure and righteous.” I saw someone ask the question “could Jesus have found the most righteous tax collector in Rome?”

Another commented that this story is not a story of repentance, but a story about restoration to community.

Pastor Nancy Rockwell says: “Zacchaeus must have been remarkably short, for Luke to have written down that detail about him. It seems he was a first century scapegoat, the guy everyone got to pick on. And that may be why he became a tax collector for the Roman Empire. **As Caesar’s tax collector**, he finally got some respect, even if it was the grudging kind. People detested paying Roman taxes, but Zaccheus had Roman soldiers to back him up, so no one was going to be surly, or beat him up when he came around, because he could send in the henchmen.

Tax collectors then generally had a reputation for pocketing a sizeable amount of what they collected. It was one of the perks of the job, to add on a hefty

surtax for yourself. So when Jesus came to Zacchaeus’ house for lunch that day, which was pretty hard for the townspeople to watch Jesus do, Zacchaeus piped right up, saying he never cheated folks, and if he had he would repay them four fold ... Jesus, in the stories the lectionary has given for the past several weeks, has held up people most folks found repulsive – lost sheep, **prodigal sons**, ... the repugnant poor man lying in a stupor covered **with sores, and** ... now, dislikeable tax collectors, urging us to look into them and discover their saintly light.”³

Traditionally, theology says that salvation follows repentance. But if we take the newer interpretation of the story, Zacchaeus was doing nothing wrong, there is a reversal of that theology.

However, in the final analysis, it doesn’t matter whether there is a conversion of Zacchaeus after his encounter with Jesus, or whether Jesus has affirmed that he has been judged unfairly by his community, and that affirmation leads to Zacchaeus being restored within the community. The end result is the same.

³ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/biteintheapple/a-short-story-about-saints-and-bullies/>

Jesus affirms Zacchaeus' biological heritage, as a son of Abraham, and also affirms his spiritual identity.

And that brings me back to Shrodinger's Cat.

Zacchaeus is in the box. If, as the theory is expressed, the state is not realized until the box is opened, and again, who is observing, and opening the box, then Zacchaeus is at the same time a cheater, and innocent. Until we open the box, he is both.

If we look at the whole story, we see that Zacchaeus certainly had an agenda. He had obviously heard something about this Jesus that was healing and teaching throughout the countryside. He was curious, enough so that he decided to seek him out, run ahead of the crowd, and climb a tree to be sure that he saw him properly.

Dennis Sanders says: **"I don't know if Zacchaeus had already been making amends or would promise to do it. What I do know is that he was both sinner and saint, one that was part of a corrupt system and trying to atone. Jesus called this flawed man a "son of Abraham" one that belongs in God's kingdom."**⁴

The story of Zacchaeus is actually the second story in the reading today. The first story is about another interruption as Jesus and his followers make their way to Jericho – a blind man on the side of the road who calls out to Jesus – several times – to let him **see again. And Jesus says "Your faith has saved you"**, we are told the man regained his sight and followed Jesus.

I'm always a bit uncomfortable with the miraculous healing stories of Jesus. It usually leads me to a reflection on what, exactly, does it mean to be healed?

Many of the healing stories of Jesus are about people with a physical disability who are miraculously cured. As wonderful as it is to think about the miracle of a cure, to look at the stories literally present challenges. The common beliefs of the time were that if a person had a physical disability then it was a punishment for something their parents had done. We also know that many who suffered disabilities were cast out by their communities because of these assumptions, which is

⁴ ibid

why they are usually found on the margins of the crowds, on the outskirts, trying to fight their way in. Jesus consistently challenged that assumption.

If we only look at a healing story in a literal way, then it somehow runs the risk of affirming that the only way to be “healed” is to be healed physically. What does it mean to be “whole”? What if there isn’t physical healing? Doesn’t God already love each and every one of us the way we are, now? There are folks within the disabilities network in the United Church of Canada that are challenging us to think differently about what has been our traditional theology around disability.

I tell a story in my book that I heard many years ago. **It’s** a well documented story about the first inhabitants of Martha’s Vineyard on the eastern coast. One of the original inhabitants was deaf, and had two deaf children. There was a gene passed on through the generations so that over the years almost every family in Martha’s Vineyard had at least one deaf person. The whole community, deaf and non-deaf, spoke sign language. Deafness was not seen as a disability, but a specific characteristic that some folks had. With the arrival of special homes, programs, and education for deaf persons, not only did the deafness disappear in the

community, but also the ability to integrate the diversity.

And so once again, we are back to community. In both stories, two people that were judged and outcasts in their communities – transformed by an encounter with Jesus.

But wait, was it the individuals that were transformed, or were their communities transformed?

Well we are back to Shrodinger’s Cat again aren’t we? Until we open the box, both are true. Thanks be to God.