

We are continuing our Unraveled series – thinking about how we seek God when things are falling apart in our lives, recognizing how God meets us in those tough places when we are unraveling and how He weaves or knits us into something new.

When many of us hear the name Zacchaeus, we think of the children’s song. Do you remember the words, and no, I am not going to sing it! The song tells us that he was short but wanted to see Jesus as he passed by, so he climbed up a tree to be able to see over the heads of the crowd. Jesus stopped under the tree, told Zacchaeus to come down and went to his house for dinner. That’s where the song ends. We hear more in the scripture that Jim read for us. We hear more about Zacchaeus than his height and his tree climbing abilities. We hear that the gathered crowd was angry that Jesus was going to eat at Zacchaeus’ house. And we learn that after Jesus invited himself to dinner, Zacchaeus repented of his sins, gave half his money to the poor and promised to repay those he cheated by four times the amount he took from them. We need to know a bit more about Zacchaeus and the society of the time to understand it was he was so disliked and why the people were so angry that Jesus went to share a meal with him.

During the time that Israel was under the rule of the Roman Empire, tax collectors were seen as traitors because they worked for the Roman rulers rather than their own Jewish communities. Zacchaeus was a Jewish man who chose to work for the Roman Empire because of the status and financial benefit. Jericho produced and exported balsam and Zacchaeus would have benefitted financially from his position. Tax collectors were also seen as corrupt – Zacchaeus’ promise to repay four times over anyone he cheated tells us that he probably was corrupt and collected more money than his neighbors actually owed, keeping the difference for himself. We aren’t told in scripture why Zacchaeus was so interested in seeing Jesus that he, a grown man, would climb up into a tree for a chance to see Jesus. He most certainly heard stories about this man that was traveling, teaching and healing – changing hearts and lives with his message. We can guess that Zacchaeus must have felt something unravelling in his life or maybe he felt like something in his life needed to unravel. Maybe he had become aware of the mistakes that he had been making.

Knitters know all about mistakes and unraveling. We all make mistakes as we work, hopefully we catch them soon after they are made so that they are easier to fix. When we notice a wrong stitch or a dropped stitch, it is usually an easy fix. Here’s a new word for nonknitters – tink T I N K is knit K N I T spelled backwards and it means to unknit a few stitches to get to the mistake. I can tink back, fix the mistake and go on with the project. After I fix the mistake, the fabric looks the way it should and will go on to become a strong, functional, warm sock. In life, we can see something we did wrong – a bad decision that we can rectify or a sin that we recognize. We can apologize to the person we have wronged, make reparations and ask God for forgiveness. Zacchaeus apparently missed the chance to tink – he did not notice his first steps into sin or if he noticed them, he chose not to correct them and return to the life God wanted him to be living. Zacchaeus continued on the path of greed and corruption, further away from where God wanted him to be.

Knitters do the same thing – we don't notice the stitch that is wrong, that the whole row doesn't look right or that we have dropped stitches. Not noticing the mistakes when they happen we just keep knitting along until it is no longer easy TINK. For me, these big, full garment mistakes often occur when I decide to not follow the pattern. I decide to use a different yarn than the designer intended for their pattern or I find a yarn I love and try to make it fit a pattern or I just knit without a pattern at all. Knitters will often just keep knitting even when we see that the project will not turn out the way we want it to, sometimes only admitting there is a problem when the project is finished. Some of us stick it, part way done, in a bag in back of a closet and tell ourselves we will get back to it later and that the issues will all work out. But, of course, they don't. There is only one way to fix these kinds of mistakes – take the stitches off the needle and rip it out. Another new word – knitters call this frogging – because rip it rip it reminds us of the sound a frog makes. My non knitting friends, this is a hard decision to make. It is so discouraging to rip out hours, weeks or months of work. It can be frustrating that something so much time and effort went into just isn't turning out the way we planned. We were so sure that it would be a wonderful project that we ignored the signs and the mistakes until we were forced to see them. Once we face the truth we have to make the choice to completely unravel it. Now, for the word pattern substitute commandments or God's plan for our lives. Sometimes we don't follow the pattern that God has laid out for us. We think we know better what we are supposed to be doing. We think that we don't need to follow the rules or that the rules just don't apply to what we are trying to accomplish. And if we don't catch our sin in time to tink it back, we end up with a huge mess that we just can't salvage.

Are we like Zacchaeus? Have we blown past the chance to apologize, seek forgiveness and move forward on God's path for us? Are we in an unrecoverable situation? Is there something nagging at us, telling us that we need to make a change? Have we plowed on with our own plan despite signs that is isn't what God wants for us?

For the past months, we have become more aware or aware in a new way that there is great disparity in our country. Disparity in income, in food, housing and job security, in healthcare and in basic human rights and treatment. Many of us are still struggling to accept that issues of racism did not disappear after the work of the 60's and 70's to improve civil rights in this country. Many of us are looking at the fabric of our beliefs, opinions or word choices to see if we need to be unraveling. We aren't always sure when a thought or a word is perpetuating racism. Is this a wrong stitch or is it okay? We may be reading or we may be talking with people more familiar with concepts of racism or privilege to learn if we have been making mistakes. Once we identify our errors, we may be looking for advice and support to figure out how to tink them and then, more importantly, how to proceed with our lives to avoid those issues of racism. Maybe we are recognizing that the pattern of our beliefs is too far removed from God's plan for an easy fix. We may be faced with the challenge of unravelling our belief system and starting over. These are disturbing situations to find ourselves in. We are finding ourselves having to look at words like racism and privilege in new ways and it is uncomfortable.

But as uncomfortable as unraveling our lives can be, it is also the only way to get back on the path God has planned for each one of us.

Zacchaeus had to frog his life. Something he heard about Jesus made him start thinking about how he was living his life. He climbed that tree to see Jesus because he knew something wasn't right in his life. Zacchaeus grew up in the Jewish community so he knew, on some level, each seemingly small sin that led to the life he was living before he climbed that tree. He sat in that tree – despised by his community and viewed as a corrupt traitor – waiting to see if there was another way. When Jesus invited Zacchaeus to come down from the tree and serve him dinner, he was extending the grace to unravel all Zacchaeus' mistakes. The grace to turn things around and walk away from the corruption and greed that controlled his actions. Zacchaeus took that grace and repented. He gave away his ill-gotten gains and was prepared to repay those he cheated four times that amount he wrongly took from them.

Jesus extends that same grace to each of us. When we catch our sin, we ask for his forgiveness and reenter that state of grace filled relationship with God. But even when we don't catch the first sin, or the second or third or twenty-third, that grace is still extended. Even when some component of our lives: our careers, our family situation, our relationships, our behavior or our beliefs are too far away from God's plan for us, we are still not lost! We can climb a tree to see over the crowd of the way everyone around us is living their lives and look for Jesus. Jesus is there, reaching his hand out to us and telling us to get out of the tree and come live in relationship with him! We are given the chance to unravel all of our mistakes and start over with God. As hard as it may be, we can pull the stitches of the needles, frog the whole thing and start over, but this time we can follow the pattern, so that we create the life that God intends for us to be living.

Don't be afraid to look at the fabric of your life and see if it is unraveling or if it needs to be unraveled. Look for the mistakes and fix them as soon as you find them. And if you find that there are too many things wrong to just fix a few stitches, don't hesitate to frog it. Unraveling mistakes puts you in the position to be able to respond when Jesus reaches his hand out to you. No matter how difficult it is to admit things are a mess, deciding to unravel our mistakes open us to the grace Jesus offers to all.