

An Innocent Man? 11/3/2013

Luke 19:1-10

He entered Jericho and was passing through it.

2 A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich.

3 He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. 4 So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way.

5 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.

7 All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.”

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.”

9 Then Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. 10 For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

WHAT’S IN A NAME?

When we name our children, it often expresses our hope for their future.

For example, my daughter, Carrie Anne was named for a favorite Aunt who lived with great courage and integrity.

We named our son Christopher.
That name means “Christ bearer.”

I wonder if a mother and father long ago were expressing the same kind of hope when they name their little boy Zacchaeus.

That name in Hebrew means “clean or innocent.” Maybe they wanted little Zacchaeus to be a righteous person, a pillar of the community.

Little Zacchaeus did not live up to his name.

He “grew up” to become a tax collector, a flunky for the Roman IRS. Actually, the Bible tells us he was a chief tax collector, and that he was rich.

Zacchaeus was the little man in charge of a dirty, disreputable business.

How does this happen?

How does a good Jewish boy become a traitor to his own people?

We don’t know.

Maybe he loved money more than integrity.

Maybe this was the only job he could get.

For that matter, how do any of us get where we are in life?

We make what seems like the best decision we can, given the circumstances.

But, sometimes we wake up feeling far from home and alienated from the people we love.

We have the feeling that we should have been something more, something different.

But, now its too late, or at least it seems that way.

In a word we feel lost.

A SEEKER

I don’t know if you’ve ever felt that way. But, that was how Zacchaeus felt.

For all the success he had as a tax collector, there was a big hole in his life.

He was a seeker. He wanted something more, something different.

Well, it “just so happens” that Jesus was passing through Zacchaeus’ hometown of Jericho.

(Spoiler alert, I don’t believe in just so happens. I believe God is involved in everything.)

But, anyway the Bible tells us that it “just so happens” that Jesus was passing through Jericho.... or so it seemed.

Zacchaeus had heard about Jesus.

Come to think of it, everyone had heard about Jesus.

Huge crowds followed him wherever he went.

Jesus was a great healer and an amazing teacher. Everyone wanted some time with Jesus.

But, there was something about Jesus that particularly intrigued Zacchaeus.

Yes, Jesus healed the sick, was an amazing teacher, and ate with the religious elite.

But, Jesus also healed foreigners, forgave sins, and ate with tax collectors like him.

It shocked most people that Jesus would do a thing like this.

After all, aren’t we known by the company we keep?

One rotten apple spoils the barrel, right?

With Jesus, that didn’t seem to be true.

And so Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus.

Actually, the Bible tells us that Zacchaeus wanted to “see who Jesus was.”

That sounds like more than just wanting to wave at Jesus as he passed through town.

Zacchaeus had the feeling that his future was somehow bound up with this strange Messiah figure that ate with sinners, this Messiah figure that even cared about people like him.

THE CALL

But, there was a problem. Zacchaeus was a short man, and the crowd was blocking his view of Jesus. So Zacchaeus ran ahead of the procession, climbed a tree and waited.

Before long the crowd made it to the tree where Zacchaeus was perched.

And Jesus looked up and said,
 “Zacchaeus, hurry down. I’m coming to your house today!”

Now how did Jesus know the name of that wee little man peeking through the branches at him?

I see this as the important moment in the story. Jesus calls Zacchaeus by name. Jesus not only knows his name; Jesus knows what his name means.

The call of Jesus is a call for Zacchaeus to live up to his name. In Jesus Christ Zacchaeus can become what his parents envisioned for him long ago when they named him the innocent one.

It is a call for Zacchaeus to come clean and be clean.
 In Jesus Christ Zacchaeus can be forgiven.
 In Jesus Christ Zacchaeus can be saved.

SEEK AND SAVE

What was the goal of Jesus’ ministry?

We have it in today’s lesson.
 Jesus came to seek out and save the lost.
 Jesus came to seek out those who have been blocked out by the crowd and are up a tree.

Jesus was doing more than just passing through Jericho long ago. He was on a mission to call people back to their roots, to help people become who they were called to be.

Paul tells us in his letter to the Galatians,
 “In Christ Jesus we are all children of God through faith.” (Galatians 3:26)

This was the message that Jesus brought to Zacchaeus that day.
Come down from that tree.
Come home with me.

We cannot save ourselves.
But, God in Christ can save us.
Jesus can call us home, our true home.

Zacchaeus didn't have to be told twice.

The Bible tells us he scrambled down out of that tree as fast as he could go.

I rather imagine that in his haste to make it to Jesus that Zacchaeus came tumbling down out of that tree, landing unceremoniously on his backside.

THE MIRACLE

And while he sat there in the dust, this little rich man who was despised by so many, some in the crowd began to sneer.

And the crowd that so enthusiastically followed Jesus began to turn on him. All of them had the same question.

Why did Jesus pick Zacchaeus? Why did Jesus want to go home with a man like this?

I like the way Frederick Buechner put it.
He wrote,

“Jericho snickered up their sleeves to think he didn't have better sense than to invite himself to the house of a man that nobody else would touch with a ten-foot pole.”

I imagine Zacchaeus standing up, dusting himself off, and then saying in front of Jesus and the crowd:

“I vow to be different. Here and now I'm giving half of my money to the poor. And if I've defrauded anyone, I'll pay them back fourfold.”

Jesus did a lot of miracles in his day. But, this might be one of the greatest miracles of all. When a rich tax collector gives all his money away and decides to follow Jesus, now that's a miracle.

A preacher from Central America spoke at Presbytery when I lived in Virginia. She was talking about some liberal ministers who came from the United States to preach to the poor in her land. The topic was the feeding of the five thousand with only five loaves and two fish.

The liberal preachers said something like,
"This may not have been a miracle.
Maybe the more wealthy people in the crowd decided to share what they had with those who didn't have much."

But, their teaching did not have the desired effect. With wide eyes the people said,

"Wow, the rich people shared with the poor? That really was a miracle!"

SALVATION

Jesus didn't tell Zacchaeus to give everything away. Jesus just called Zacchaeus by name, and Zacchaeus, out of gratitude lived up to his name.

He came clean. He made things right.

Today many people preach that we are saved by our possessions. In the case of Zacchaeus we see a man who was saved *from* his possessions.

Zacchaeus wanted to be rich. But, his desire for wealth at all costs separated him from God and God's people.

But, when Zacchaeus left everything to follow Jesus, this anguished man found his way home. He was no longer known as the short, tax collector.

Now he was known as a Son of Abraham.

He was a child of God. He was saved.

And that was what Jesus wanted all along, to seek and to save the lost.

LEANING TO SEEK THE LOST

I believe that if we want to follow Jesus, we have to want what he wants. We have to want to seek and save the lost.

The Christian faith is all about evangelism, about calling people to come back home.

In Luke's gospel the salvation of Jesus always involves a surprise.

Jesus is constantly acting in ways that defy social expectation and religious decorum.

In today's lesson the crowd grumbles about the fact that Jesus is going to the home of a notorious sinner. But, Jesus seeks out this sinner out of love.

I wonder.

What do we need to be doing that might be out of step with society and religious decorum?

How can we seek the lost today?

Today's lesson suggests that it doesn't begin by judging them. It begins by making them a priority, calling them by name and going home with them.

In other words we seek out and befriend those that the world has rejected. We go against the judgment of the crowd in the name of Jesus.

What in world would motivate us to do such a thing?

Our world is polarized by politics and religion and money and power. The crowd is always ready to criticize us if we dare to seek the salvation of someone who is not one of us.

But, the Bible tells us that God has an extravagant love for the world, the whole world. And in the ministry of Jesus we catch that vision.

In Jesus we are saved for a purpose. And that purpose is to tell others of God's unconditional, no strings attached grace.

Why do you think we have the story of Zacchaeus? It is because this little man went far and wide telling his story to others.

He told of the time that he was up a tree without hope. He told of the time that he was despised by everyone and without hope.

And then Jesus saw him and called his name. Everything changed forever.

REPENTANCE

And why do we still tell the story of the wee little man who was out on a limb?

We tell it because it's also our story. What saved Zacchaeus and what saves us is learning to give away the old life in order to experience the new.

For Zacchaeus it meant giving away his ill-gotten gain. For us it may be something similar or something different, but one thing is sure.

It will be a challenge.

When Jesus calls us by name, the first thing we do is repent, that is, we go in a new direction.

It's like when the prodigal son decides to come home.

It's like when the shepherd finds the little lamb that was lost.

It's like when you tear your house apart and finally find your lost wallet.

It's like a tax collector who beats his breast and prays for forgiveness and receives it.

Or, it's like a chief tax collector who's up a tree. Jesus calls his name, his true name. And everything changes. It's like that.

SAINTS ALL

This past Friday was All Saints Day. Did you celebrate?

You should have. All of you are saints.

Don't believe it? It's true.

In the Bible a saint is not defined a perfect person or even a near perfect person.

A saint is a person who has been called by Jesus. That little loser Zacchaeus was a saint and so are you.

Today Jesus stops and calls those of us who are up a tree by name. He wants to come home with us.

You see Zacchaeus climbed a tree to see Jesus, but Jesus ascended a tree on our behalf.

His tree was the hard wood of the cross. And from that tree the world witnessed the breathtaking love that knew no bounds.

From that tree Jesus looked down on all us short people while his body was broken and his blood was flowing and said,

“Father forgive them.”

And he did.

So for those of you who are up a tree and out on a limb, Jesus wants you to come down.

Come down from a tree called anger.

Come down from a tree called greed.

Come down from a tree called doubt.

Come down from a tree called fear.

Jesus has a message for you today.

“This is my body broken for you. This is my blood shed for you.”

Come home with me.

You are forgiven and freed to live in a new way.

God help us believe in the life changing love that is ours in Christ Jesus.

Amen.