

Sermon for Sunday, October 30, 2016

OUT ON A LIMB

The story of Zacchaeus is one of the most memorable in the New Testament. But it's not about repentance as some biblical translations and interpreters suppose. It's about vindication. Its message is not directed toward Zacchaeus or the individual sinner. Its message is directed to the crowd that grumbled at what Jesus did because of their prejudice, and to the church which all too often suffers from the same blindness and sin.

If you been attentive these past few weeks, you've noticed that Luke is challenging the crowd's stereotypes, presumptions, and prejudices that create insiders and outsiders and divide the body from itself. Not all judges are just, not all widows are retiring, not all Samaritans are faithless, and not all rich people are guaranteed entrance into heaven. Luke would, no doubt, challenge many of our stereotypes, presumptions, and prejudices today that continue to divide the body from itself. With little effort, you can name them yourself.

Zacchaeus was a despised man. He was a chief tax collector, in charge of collecting taxes in an entire district, and the manager of any number of subordinates. The Jews considered what he did as tantamount to treason. By collecting taxes, he helped support the Romans. As far as they were concerned, Zacchaeus had sold his soul to the devil, and he deserved to burn in hell. On top of that, his dedication to his job made him wealthy, that is, rich with the money he exacted from his fellow Jews in taxes. They were not only jealous of his wealth, but angry about how he came by it. His diminutive stature added insult to injury. This little man, they felt, was taking them to the cleaners, fleecing them of their hard-earned wages.

So Zacchaeus was an outcast. Although a Jew, he was considered a traitor. He had no friends. He was jeered at and spat upon as he walked the streets, which he did in peril to his life. His wealth could buy him comfort, but it could not buy him happiness or companionship. He was desperately lonely, and deeply hurt by the rejection of his own people. He was not even allowed to enter the synagogue for worship.

We like to think that in this post-modern era we are beyond such behavior, especially in the church, but we know better. Just look at the divisions caused by this election cycle, where some are contemptuously labeled as liberals and others as conservatives, even in the church, even in our church. No, we have made little progress in coming to grips with our own prejudices and sin that cause some to feel unappreciated or leprous.

So it is not surprising that Zacchaeus, lonely and rejected, when he hears that Jesus of Nazareth is coming to town, is decidedly curious, even eager, to catch a glimpse of this unique figure who has been rumored to rub elbows with and even sit at table with sinners and outcasts. You know the rest of the story. Too short to see above the heads of the crowd of onlookers, and jostled by the detractors around him, he climbs a tree to get a better look. Jesus sees him, and to the consternation of the crowd, invites himself to dinner with Zacchaeus, and pronounces salvation upon this man who so graciously received him.

But if this isn't a story about repentance, then how does salvation come to Zacchaeus? From the story of the rich young ruler, just a short chapter earlier in Luke's gospel, we know how difficult it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. What allows this second rich man to slide through the narrow door so effortlessly?

First, Zacchaeus is not quite the louse that his fellow Jews make him out to be. When the crowd wags its judgmental finger at Jesus for being the guest in the house of a sinner, Zacchaeus, rather than repenting, as so many commentators suppose, defends himself, saying, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I pay back four times as much." In saying this, Zacchaeus reveals that he is even more righteous than his accusers. He is going well beyond the demands of the Law, giving far more than a tithe to the poor, and paying retributive justice to those he may have defrauded to a most generous degree. To the certain embarrassment of the crowd, this man is living by the spirit of the Law instead of just by its letter. Jesus has

uncovered a man of great faith and exemplary religious dedication. He is truly living up to his name, “Zacchaeus,” which means “the righteous one.” Jesus had told the rich young ruler, that he lacked one thing to enter the kingdom of God, a giving spirit. So he told him to sell all he had and give to the poor that he might have treasure in heaven. Zacchaeus was already doing just that, even though no one knew it. He already, had the heart of a true disciple of Christ. So first, Zacchaeus is fulfilling the spirit of the Law, a fact which numbers him among the precious few.

Second, Zacchaeus receives the gift of salvation, because of the way in which he receives Jesus. The crowd is suspicious of this visitor to their city. They have heard rumors of his unorthodox words and his questionable behavior. Jesus is under judgment here, being observed and evaluated by the host of onlookers. But there is no judgment of him by Zacchaeus. As Jesus passes by the tree, he says, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” And Zacchaeus hurries and comes down, and receives Jesus, joyfully!

Jewish Law demanded that Jews offer hospitality to the sojourner in their midst, in part as a reminder that they too had once been a sojourning people. But it never said they had to like doing so. Again, Zacchaeus shows that he is a righteous man, by living not only by the letter of the Law, but also by its spirit. He receives Jesus, a sojourner, an outcast like himself, with joyful hospitality. And John would later write, “And to all who receive him, who believe in his name, he gives power to become children of God (John 1:12). Jesus knows immediately, that this is one of the true children of Abraham, one of God’s chosen. Zacchaeus receives salvation not because he repents, and not because of his faith per-se, but because he is a son of Abraham, a Jew, a member of the chosen people, despite the fact that his brothers and sisters in faith reject and despise him. In front of his accusers, Jesus vindicates him.

Third, and I think the most important for us to note, is that Zacchaeus receives the gift of salvation because he went out on a limb. Others, unable to see Jesus clearly on the journey of faith, just turn away and go home. But Zacchaeus seeks higher ground in order to catch a good look at this remarkable person. He sought Jesus out. He entered a crowd that was hostile to him, suffered the embarrassment and humiliation of climbing a tree so he could see, and Jesus found him. His risk, paid off with a gift that surpasses understanding, the gift of salvation in Christ.

It was Rudolf Bultmann who called this essential ingredient to salvation “the leap of faith.” Somewhere along the line, a person has to take a chance, risk oneself, doubt the doubts, and leap for an unknown, but hopefully better future through faith in Jesus Christ.

So Zacchaeus, instead of man to be pitied or despised, is a man to be admired and emulated. He lived not only by the letter of the Law, but allowed the spirit of the Law, the spirit of Almighty God, to stretch him to live beyond the Law’s minimum requirements. Then, when he encountered Jesus, he received him joyfully with an open and receptive heart, not concerned with how he might be judged, but rather overjoyed that he, an outcast, was acceptable to the Lord. And finally, he went out on a limb for the sake of faith, to see and know this remarkable man named Jesus. And he was saved.

Today, we celebrate brave souls, who went out on a limb to know Jesus, people like John Calvin, Martin Luther, John Knox, our Scottish ancestors who remained faithful in spite of persecution, and all those who contributed mind, heart, and life to the reformation of the church. And we acknowledge that we are not only the beneficiaries of their faithfulness and courage, but also those who are called to follow in their footsteps, always reforming the church to provide a more faithful witness in the world of the life, love, and gospel of Jesus Christ. May we be inspired by their faith, and the faith of Zacchaeus, to go out on a limb for Jesus, with our time, our talents, our resources, and our hearts, that all may be transformed by the saving love of our precious Lord.

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Luke 19:1-10