

Sunday May 23rd, 2021

Pentecost

Luke 19:1-10

Series: People We All Need in Our Lives

Sermon: "We all need a Zacchaeus"

There is a story that comes from a now out of print book entitled *English Hymns*, about a New England congregation, where the minister and the choir were at loggerheads. The conflict was based on several issues, but mostly it centered on who decided which hymns to sing on Sunday. One Sunday, the choir went so far as to decline to sing at all, as a protest to the minister's choices for music. The minister was the Rev. Dr. Samuel West who was a musician himself.

But Rev. West was very shrewd, and on the Sunday the choir was going to refuse to participate, he started the service with the familiar old hymn "Come, We Who Love the Lord" but in a twist he asked the congregation to begin with verse two which of course goes, "Let Those Refuse to Sing Who Never Knew Our God." (1001 Humorous Illustrations, p. 239) The story, unfortunately, does not tell how Rev. West's strategy worked out.

Throughout the entire life of the church; hymns and choruses, besides being a source of conflict, were a critical element to the nurture and teaching of the church. In fact, they still are. The truth of the matter is, that despite our best efforts, and intentions, to get church families to really study the bible, most of our biblical understanding and theology (rightly or wrongly) comes from hymns. In the early church when literacy, or lack thereof, was a real issue, hymns and choruses reminded people of important facts.

The same holds true for why cathedrals and old churches in Europe have such ornate decorations. A good example is of course the Cistine Chapel at the Vatican. We modern Protestants, because we tend to have much plainer worship spaces, wonder why such efforts were undertaken to paint murals and sculpt figures. The reality is that when these places were built, people were generally illiterate, so they needed the art to communicate, and remind them of bible stories and scriptural truths.

For a musical example: I have mentioned at some point, that the odd little Christmas song "The Twelve Days of Christmas" was originally a piece used in catechism classes to help remind people of crucial biblical truths. "Five swans a swimming" represented the Pentateuch or first five books of the bible. My own experience in church was also influenced heavily by music, even when I was a small child.

In Sunday school, we sang little choruses to help us remember critical stories, and truths, about God and the bible. One of my favorites as a child, was little ditty that in 1943 Mrs. N. R. Shaper put to music. I am sure there are some listening today that when you hear these words, you will be transported back to the basement Sunday school room, at your home church, and find yourself sitting on those little chairs, wearing your Sunday best.

Zacchaeus was a wee little man; a wee little man was he.

He climbed up in a sycamore tree, for the Lord he wanted to see.

And as the Savior passed him by, he looked up in the tree.

And he said, (we often paused here for effect and deepened our voices to sound more pious)

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*“Zacchaeus, you come down; for I am going to your house for tea.
For I am going to your house for tea”
Zacchaeus came down from that tree, as happy as he could be,
He gave his money to the poor, and said: “What a better man I’ll be”.*

How many remember that little song? By the way, the reference to tea does not appear in the bible, but rather is a reflection of British influence on the anonymous author of the little ditty. The lessons communicated in this chorus were not lost on me as a small boy. It was simply this: Jesus loves everyone. Even someone as despised and rejected as Zacchaeus was. It also resonated with us because as children we were “wee little people” like Zacchaeus.

We also learned sitting on those little chairs, that Jesus’ love transforms lives. As we learned that Zacchaeus refunded the money he cheated out of people, and gave money to the poor. But there is something else at play in this story that we are well aware of, but we might be somewhat uncomfortable to talk about. We know from sermons, and lessons, that Zacchaeus was an outcast in his society.

Maybe, his short stature added to his being shunned, but really it all had to do with his occupation. It is also very possible that the reference to shortness in stature, was also a clever literary device used by Luke to stress how in the eyes of his neighbours, Zacchaeus was a man of little social stature. Zacchaeus would not have been invited to the big social events of the year, or been consulted on important matters. He was in many ways a “wee little man”.

As we know, Zacchaeus was a “chief tax-collector”. What this meant was that the Romans auctioned off territories to people who were members of the occupied nations. Whoever promised to bring the most tax money to Rome, from their specific occupied territory, got the job. It was a tricky business, because if you bid too high, you would end up subsidizing everyone’s taxes with your own wealth. Bid too low, and you would not get the contract.

Rome instructed its tax collectors to collect what they promised, and there was an unwritten understanding that the tax collectors could tax extra money (an amount they set) from the populace, thus getting very rich. Furthermore, Zacchaeus was a chief tax-collector, which meant he had men working under him collecting money, and giving him a slice of their pies as well. The Romans collected taxes this way to cause dissention, and to keep the populace fighting amongst themselves.

Tax collectors were some of the most despised people in Israel, in Jesus’ day. They were seen as traitors, collaborating with the enemy. Zacchaeus was a social pariah, and he was likely spat on, threatened, and harassed. To go out in the crowd, as he did to see Jesus, was dangerous. Someone could easily slit his throat, and no one would care. Ironically his name in Hebrew means “pure”. The Roman’s also didn’t care about him. If something happened to him, well, there was always another greedy person to take his place.

Tax collectors were so despised, they were seen in the same category as prostitutes, or as is often referred to as “other sinners”.

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It was a commonly held belief that if an Israelite associated with one of these sinners, you would become tainted yourself, making you unclean before your neighbours and God. And so, these folks would have been avoided at all cost. Zacchaeus was a walking scandal, the subject of gossip, and that is why Matthew 11:19 should be shocking to anyone who hears it. Meant as a serious insult to degrade him in the eyes of the populace, the religious leaders reported loudly and often, that Jesus is a “friend” of tax-collectors and sinners.

That is certainly the charm and message at the heart of the little ditty I quoted earlier. We get it. Jesus is a friend to sinners, including all of us, and it is a marvelous thing. It is the hope we stand on and preach to the nations. Amen, service over, pass the offering plates. But hold on a minute! That’s not the whole story. There is a bit more, and it is hard to hear, and harder still to apply. If Jesus is a friend to sinners, and we believe he is; then shouldn’t we be as well.

Aha, therein lies the rub. And I am not talking about your regular run of the mill sinners we think we are, but I mean those like Zacchaeus who are on the fringe, up a tree. We have an expression “up a creek without a paddle” well Zacchaeus was up a creek or tree. He was out on a limb. Zacchaeus, holding onto a sycamore branch, is not intended to be a cute folksy picture. It’s a symbol of someone who is: misplaced, disgraced, isolated and ashamed.

I suspect we all get it, that on some level, we are all like Zacchaeus but maybe, at least in our eyes, some of us are more so: at least they are now at this moment. They are people who are up a tree. People who do not fit in. A square peg in a round hole. People who confuse us, unsettle us, and frighten us. These are people we feel awkward around, and vice versa. People we would rather not rub shoulders with, lest we become tainted somehow.

The truth is, we have all messed up. We find ourselves treed by some circumstance in our lives. None of us is without blemish or stain. As the Apostle Paul says, “All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God”. We are very good at seeing the flaws in others. In fact, the Hebrew language has fifty words that mean sin. What is it about us that we relish the idea that someone out there is worse than we are? That our own righteousness shines a bit brighter.

But as Isaiah states, our righteousness is like “filthy rags”. Jesus didn’t seem to care about his reputation. He didn’t seem to worry about who was in his company. In his book *Brother Jesus: The Nazarene through Jewish Eyes*, Rabbi Ben-Chorin went through all the rabbinical literature to find some examples of another Jewish teacher who showed as much acceptance and kindness to prostitutes and tax-collectors as Jesus did. Guess how many he found? None. Not one.

Surprising? Not really. Jesus’ love was, and is, unique. It flows out to everyone, especially those who feel unloved and unwanted. This is all leading to one undeniable fact. If Jesus had such love for the Zacchaeuses of this world, then shouldn’t we. Shouldn’t we be concerned with going to tea with those we meet who are out on a limb? Isn’t our priority befriending the odd man or woman out? Shouldn’t we be ready, and willing, to no longer force people into a mold they cannot accept and simply love them?

We all need Zacchaeuses in our lives. By this, I mean that one person who defies acceptable social standards.

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The one who is a bit awkward, or who is tormented by mental health issues, or who sees the world differently than we do. The one who dresses eccentrically, the one who, defiantly perhaps, who lives a “sinful” lifestyle.

Now here is often where we trip ourselves up in meeting and befriending Zacchaeuses. The reality and probability of you meeting a Zacchaeus in the pew in front of you, or behind you, is almost nil. Zacchaeuses no longer come to church. They do not feel welcome here, because they do not fit into the church culture. Chances are, when we encounter a Zacchaeus, they will be up a tree, or more clearly, they will be in a place we do not frequent.

Now here’s a thought that seems so obvious that I don’t know why I didn’t make the connection before. If we want to reach outsiders; then surprise, surprise, we have to be actually, outside. Seems so logical, doesn’t it? We need to be out there: in love, in service, in relationships and in compassion. Leonard Sweet states a frightening thought, and that is that our “acts of worship” are really becoming “sits of worship”. Even the bible has a book called Acts, not a book called “hunkering down”.

And the consequences of us not befriending a Zacchaeus, can be terrifying indeed. You may not remember the name, but you might remember what he did. Eric Harris was the son of a career military man. Every couple of years he, along with his family, were moved to a new military base, and therefore Eric went to a new school. When he got to Littleton Colorado, Eric went on a violent rampage, killing twelve of his classmates. Just before he did this, Eric spoke of his pain in a video he left behind. “Everywhere I went, I had to start at the bottom.”

Now a serious word of caution. Befriending a Zacchaeus is trouble. When we say a Zacchaeus is odd, I am not referring to cute and quirky, but disagreeably odd. You will know if you are truly befriending a Zacchaeus, when people start to accuse you of running with the wrong crowd. To others watching us, a Zacchaeus is someone who holds us back, and damages our reputation. When, was the last time anyone said of us that we were friends of sinners?

A Zacchaeus will rub you, and others, the wrong way. They will add farce and friction to your life. This is why, although you can never have enough Barnabuses in your life, you can have too many Zacchaeuses. Life is hard enough without too many wildcards. A Zacchaeus makes your life less efficient. They do not care if their lives are well oiled and running smoothly. In many ways it may be helpful to think of befriending a Zacchaeus as a kind of cross-cultural exercise.

When we think of other cultures we think of different traditions, different habits, differing world views; the same thing applies to a Zacchaeus. Have you noticed that Jesus is always making room for people? It’s incredible to think that our Lord, who said he had no place to call his own, no place to lay his head, continuously is making room for people. His parables reflect this, like the Good Samaritan, but more importantly his behavior reflected this.

Ever notice how little time in the Gospel is focused on Jesus being in the temple, or synagogue? Most of the time, Jesus is away from the religious centers. Away from the places that excluded people. Instead, he went out and met them.

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Lepers, prostitutes, tax-collectors, the demon possessed, the lame, the blind and the poor. Jesus went out, and met them, and welcomed them to himself. Years ago, in a small rural Presbyterian church there was a young woman who came to the church, and wanted to present her child for baptism.

I should mention that this child was born out of wedlock, and in a small community like this, a woman can find herself shunned. On the day of the baptism, that woman stood alone before the congregation holding her child. The pastor hadn't quite clued in on the awkwardness of the situation. We know this because without thinking he came to the part of the service when the question is asked, "Who stands with this child, to assure the commitments and promises herewith made will be carried out?"

Who will be there for this child in times of need, and assure that this child is brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord?" It was only then that the minister realized there was no godmother or godfather on hand to answer the question. But without hesitation, as though on cue, the entire congregation stood together and with one voice said, "We will!" (Let me Tell You a Story, p. 164) Who are you standing with?

Who are you making room for in your life, that no one else will?