

Come On Down...

November 3, 2013

Luke 19:1-10

1 Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. 2 A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. 3 He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. 4 So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. 5 When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." 6 So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. 7 All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner.'" 8 But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." 9 Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. 10 For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."

We are a culture that needs to know. We like the instructions that come with a do it yourself project that have pictures showing where each piece goes. If someone laughs over an email we want to know what it said. When one person receives a phone call we want to either have it on speaker phone so both of us can hear it or the minute the person hangs up we have to discuss what was said and know who was calling and about what. We jump up and down in a crowd to see what is happening or we are like Zacchaeus and climb up higher to get a better look.

This has always been one of my favorite stories of Jesus. It was a favorite song to be learned in Sunday School and is a fairly familiar part of scripture. When I was little I learned this story as one that meant size did not matter to finding Jesus. You could be tall or short big or small but there were always ways of seeing Jesus in a crowd. While this childlike perception is one that preaches a good sermon. I challenged myself to find more meaning, more depth, more something.

I realized that like Zacchaeus we often will climb up on something to get a better look. We cannot see what is happening in our gutters unless we get a ladder. We cannot repair our roofs from the ground. We use this same perspective change a lot in our lives. We 'take a step' back or away from a project to gain a new perspective so we can start fresh and new. We adjust the lenses on our cameras to get the best angle, the best pictures.

We use this concept over and over in our daily lives, but what about our spiritual lives. What is it about taking a step back and seeing the world in a new perspective that helps to change us spiritually? Helps us to see Jesus and climb down from the sycamore tree and become a new person in Christ?

Now Zacchaeus was the most despised man in Jericho, a crook, a cocky little crook. Not only was he a tax collector at the toll booth; he was the chief tax collector. The big boss. The richest man in town. He worked for the Roman government, collecting their taxes, and Zacchaeus would pad the tax, for his own personal benefit. Zacchaeus was a thief, a con man, but untouchable because he was protected by the Roman government.

So there he was above everyone in the crowd enjoying the parade of people coming into the city. By this point in Jesus' ministry he was receiving a lot of followers. He raised Lazarus from the dead, had healed countless peoples, he had done a good portion of his ministry, and many people wanted his time and attention.

But here is the interesting point in the story, the change where Jesus once again does something a bit unexpected and astonishes a lot of people. He calls to Zacchaeus and tells him he is going to his house today. It is at his house that Zacchaeus is changed. Irrevocably changed by something in his encounter with Jesus. We do not know a lot about what went on in the house. We just know the result.

Zaccheaus decides to give back his taxes to the poor and pay back people he has defrauded four times over. Since we already know that he was a crook and a swindler we can imagine that the amount he was talking about was substantial. Then Jesus praises Zaccheaus and Jesus tells him that salvation has come to him this day, and it was because the son of Man came to seek the Lost.

There are many ways to take this scripture. It is the second time that Jesus has encountered a rich man. We are familiar with the earlier story found in Luke that is about the rich young ruler who wanted to be saved. Jesus invited him to sell all he had and give it to the poor. The young man could not do it. Jesus' response was that, "It is harder for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. But with God, all things are possible." Now, three stories later in the Gospel of Luke, we discover a rich man who somehow goes through the eye of a needle and is saved.

We could talk about the fact that Jesus will eat with anyone, no matter how bad of a person he or she is said to be. And so it is with Jesus' meal, Holy Communion. If you are the biggest sinner in town, Jesus wants you at his table. The worst of the worst, Jesus wants to share his meal of forgiveness with you.

However I believe that the most important perspective of this story is that we once again see the transforming power of Jesus' love and caring and intentional calling of a person. Jesus' love is a transformative love. Jesus showed he loved Zaccheaus in spite of all his sin and in that love Zaccheaus was a transformed man.

We have this temptation within ourselves to withhold love from people, when we do not like the shape of the sinfulness in their lives. It is one of those fun human nature things. For example, a husband and wife may have some qualities that really grate each other, and over time, there is the temptation to withhold love from my husband or wife because the nature of their sinfulness irritates so much. ... Or your teenager, going through that teenager rebellion which is so hard for everyone, and there is a temptation to withhold one's love when the rebellion is at the worst. ... Or when your boss is so autocratically and blindly demanding....or the person who works for you is so inept and incompetent in doing trivial tasks, over time there is a temptation to withhold one's love because one doesn't like the shape of sinfulness in the other person. ... Or your neighbor with the incessantly barking dog or tall trees that block your view. ... Or for those of us who have adult children, our adult children may make choices that disappoint us enormously and we can get so frustrated by seeing the consequences of their poor choices, that we begin to slowly withhold our love from them. ...

Or towards ourselves, the person living underneath our own skin, we may not like the sinfulness in ourselves that we begin to withhold our love for ourselves because we see ourselves as being so inept and incompetent. Jesus, however, loved Zacchaeus, even though he was amongst the worst of sinners. When you and I are at our sinful worst, Jesus continues to love us also. That is the truth that is at the heart of this story. And it is within that quality of love that a person is changed. We all recognize this and accept this and for many of us as we celebrate All Saint's Day we experienced it with some of those wonderful saints.

Jesus did not simply come into Zacchaeus' house that day. Rather, Jesus got into Zacchaeus' ... heart ... that day. That is what changed him. No one is ever changed to be a generous person unless Jesus gets into your heart; and when Jesus gets into your heart, your life will be changed. The *exact words* do not matter; but Jesus in your heart *does* matter. It is his presence, not any special words, that changes us. *When the Spirit is right, any words will do.*

I love the story. I can see it so clearly. Short little Zacchaeus wanting to see Jesus of Nazareth, the religious superstar, but all those people were in his way. Cleverly, Zacchaeus looked down the Jericho road and climbed a sycamore tree and waited, and sure enough, here came Jesus. The donkey stopped right underneath where Zacchaeus was perched on a limb. Jesus said: "Zacchaeus...you come down...for I am coming to your ... *heart* ... today." Amen.