



A Wee Little Man

Calvary Church, United Methodist
Sermon by Rev. John Mueller, Oct 31, 2004

Scripture Reading: **Luke 19:1-10**

¹ 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.'

Sermon:

The story of Zacchaeus is one of the more familiar ones in the gospels. I remember being introduced to it as a child and perhaps some of you were as well. I even remember a song I learned over 30 years ago about this story, a song that I still carry with me: "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." Is this song familiar to anyone else?

The story of Zacchaeus is a wonderful story, and like all good stories, each time you revisit it, you can see different things in it; things you missed, or didn't fully appreciate or understand at an earlier time. So, today, I'd like us to take another look at this familiar story.

The story begins with Jesus traveling through Jericho. If we read a little earlier on, we discover that Jesus' trip through Jericho is part of a longer journey he is making from Galilee to Jerusalem, his final destination. Jericho was a town on a main trade route and an important customs center, about 15 miles or so north east of Jerusalem and it would have been the last significant stop on the road to the great city of David.

While passing through, a man named Zacchaeus tries to get a closer view of Jesus. The only description we're given of the man is that he was a tax collector and rich. This, along with the fact that Zacchaeus was apparently a small man, physically, is all we know about him. Zacchaeus is so small that he can't see Jesus over the crowds that have been following him, and so Zacchaeus runs ahead and climbs up a tree some to get a better look.

Clearly Zacchaeus is eager to learn more about Jesus. This is an important first observation, in the story. We don't know what provoked his interest or curiosity, but his desire to get closer to Jesus is clear. Then the story tells us that Jesus sees Zacchaeus in the tree and invites himself over to Zacchaeus' house. Which isn't a bad strategy. After all, Jesus was traveling on the road from Galilee to Jerusalem, a fairly significant trip. Travel wasn't easy during those days, and we know that Jesus didn't have much money or take much with him. Jesus and his followers were probably tired and hungry. So, Jesus sees Zacchaeus, one of the wealthier people in the community, and says, "Zacchaeus, we're coming over to your house for dinner" Smart! We're told Zacchaeus is over-joyed at this news, but others around Jesus aren't so pleased. Some murmur to them selves saying, "he has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner."

Now before we go any further, it's interesting to ask, why Zacchaeus was considered a "sinner." We don't know too much about him, so the little we do know must contain the reason; he was the chief tax collector and rich. This story, therefore, gives us an interesting perspective on the notion of sinners and sinfulness. Religious people can spend a lot of time and energy on the notion of sin, sinners, and sinfulness. Indeed it can be argued that it's at the heart of our faith. Each time we celebrate Holy Communion these words are spoken, "Christ died for us while we were yet sinners, proving God's love towards us." This story gives us a view of sinfulness that we often don't focus on. Zacchaeus was not a sinner because he frequented bars occasionally, or because of some perceived sexual immorality. He wasn't a sinner because he had doubts about God, or because he didn't attend church regularly. He wasn't a sinner because he played cards, spit, danced on Sundays, cussed, or chewed tobacco. You know what I mean? This story reminds us that sometimes we might focus too much in one general area when we talk about the notion of sin – and not some others.

Zacchaeus was considered a "sinner" even though he had a pretty nice job, even though he was a man of some significance in the community. Zacchaeus was considered a "sinner" because he was rich, and as a chief tax collector, he would have made a great deal of his money through his ties to the empire. What empire would that be? The Romans were the occupying force in Jesus' land at the time and they collected taxes from the Jews, people they had subjugated in order to support their

imperial ambitions. So Zacchaeus was considered a “sinner” because he benefited from the ways of Empire, from a system of oppression. His life, his livelihood came at the expense of others, indeed his own people, and this was his sin.

At a minimum this story reminds us that the way we make our money, is a key factor in determining our relationship with God. Not only what we do or don't do with our money matters, but how we acquire it as well! This story reminds us that if we make our money through a system of oppression, then we are liable to God's judgment. It might even be suggesting that if we simply enjoy benefits from arrangements that bring hardship to others, we're liable to God's judgment as well. St. Augustine, pushing this notion some, went so far to say, “He who possesses a surplus, possesses the goods of others,” which would suggest, according to this story, a form of sinful behavior.

So, what might this story say about a current, seemingly, legal and acceptable practice of some executives who cut other people's jobs and accept huge raises all in the interest of keeping stockholders happy? What does this say about the practice of predatory lending? What might this say about – me - and a lifestyle I've become accustomed to that certainly has its challenges, but also is filled with a fair amount of “surplus?”

Scripture says, “the truth will make you free,” and it does. But often, first it can make you uncomfortable and even miserable for a while. The notion that God is against the status quo, is against so much of what we have come to be so dependent upon, comfortable and familiar with, is one of the hardest things to believe if we are Christians who happen to profit by the status quo – like Zacchaeus. In the words of William Sloane Coffin, former pastor the Riverside Church in New York City, “In fact, most of us don't really believe it (that God is against the status quo), not in our hearts. We comfort ourselves with the thought that because our intentions are good (nobody gets up in the morning and says, ‘whom can I oppress today?’), we don't have to examine the consequences of our actions. As a matter of fact, many of us are even eager to respond to injustice, as long as we can do so without having to confront the causes of it. And there's the great pity of charity. Handouts to needy individuals are genuine, necessary responses to injustice, but they do not necessarily face the reason for the injustice... (charity) is desperately needed in an economy whose prosperity is based on growing inequality.”

Another reason why we can tell we're on to something here is because of what comes next in the story. After people murmur because Jesus, the champion of the poor, is meeting with someone who is rich and powerful, Zacchaeus stands before Jesus and says "Behold Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold." Zacchaeus' encounter with Jesus leads to one response – the redistribution of his wealth, an earnest desire to divest himself from some of his privilege.

This is where the story of Zacchaeus is offered as a contrast to one told just a few verses earlier. In chapter 18, just before the story of Zacchaeus, Luke tells the story of a rich young ruler who asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Are you familiar with that story? (Luke 18:18-30) After telling Jesus that he has followed all the commandments from his youth, Jesus says to him, "One thing you still lack, sell all that you have and distribute it to the poor...and come follow me." But, we're told that when he heard this, the person went away sorrowful, because he had many possessions.

In the earlier story, the person of wealth refused to re-distribute it and so, couldn't follow Jesus. It's a discipleship rejection story – a missed opportunity. In contrast, this story about a "wee-little" man called Zacchaeus, gives us another picture. In this story - the wealthy get it! They are redeemed. Indeed, Zacchaeus is "saved" through his willingness to divest himself from his privilege and to redistribute his wealth to those in need of it.

After all, Jesus says to all who are listening, "Today, *salvation* has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham." Isn't that interesting? Salvation came to Zacchaeus, not because he confessed Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior, not because he asked Jesus to forgive his sins, and so far as we can tell, not solely because of anything he thought in his head, or believed in his heart, but because of what he chose to do with his money. This story says "salvation" can come through a more just distribution of wealth in a society.

What are the implications of this truth for us today? I suppose there are many. In two days we're going to have a chance to vote, and in my mind at least, we'll have a choice between two different visions of how wealth should be accumulated, circulated, and distributed in this land. Interestingly enough, the word used often for "salvation" in the Bible,

literally means “safety” and “soundness.” The connection is an interesting one. This suggests that the way we’re ultimately going to feel safer in this world, is through a more just distribution of the resources.

I’d like to share a little story with you that might help illustrate some of what I’m saying. In yesterday’s *Boston Globe*, there was an article in the Living/Arts section called “Widows without Borders.” The article is about two women, Susan Retik of Needham, who was seven months pregnant with their third child and Patti Quigley of Wellesley, who was eight months pregnant with her second child, when their husbands were killed on 9/11. The women met shortly after the terrorist attacks and have formed a strong friendship through their shared grief and pain.

The article goes on to state how after their horrific loss, they received overwhelming support from family, friends, neighbors, and even strangers. People made dinners for them, sent quilts, stuffed animals, they received letters from all over the country, and money – so much money and material aid - from the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, Catholic Charities, the Mass 9/11 Fund and the employers of their husbands. One said she received a stack of quilts this big! The whole world seemed to want to wrap themselves around them.

One other experience this Jewish woman and Christian woman shared was a sense of horror over the plight of widows in Afghanistan who were also touched by terrorism and war. They were haunted by the images and stories of women left without husbands in that land who had to go on to live in severe poverty. According to one agency there are 30,000 to 50,000 widows in Kabul alone, with an average of five children each. Many of these women lost their property rights when their husbands died during the US effort to remove the Taliban, most were illiterate and unskilled.

So, these women created a non-profit called “Beyond the 11th” and began raising money for the widows of a land they admit they couldn’t locate on a map before 9/11. So far they’ve raised \$140,000 and seek to do even more. In the article, Retik states, “We went into Afghanistan to remove the Taliban and root out terrorists, and that’s great. But the country was left in shambles. We can’t just walk away. It will breed more terrorism. Without basic needs, people become desperate and desperate people do desperate things.” There’s some real wisdom here. The article ends by saying both women believe their husbands would be

proud of their efforts. Besides helping Afghan widows they say, their efforts are helping their own wounds heal!

The story about Zacchaeus ends with words of Jesus, words he states in other places in the gospels, about those who are lost and sick: "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." Given what happens in the story, who are the ones who Jesus considers "lost?" Think about this question in light of the story. The ones "lost" are not the ones we might traditionally think of – the "lost" are not the poor, but the wealthy, the lost are not the one's out of work or looking for work, but the one's who have a pretty nice job. The "lost" are not those who struggle to make ends meet, but rather the "well-to-do." The ones who are "lost" are those who don't see how their privilege has come at the expense of others.

I'd like to share a final quote from Rev. Coffin's book, "Credo."

"It is not to say that the weak are virtuous. No, as power corrupts the strong, so lack of it corrupts the weak. Suspicion, intolerance, apathy – all fruits of weakness often characterize life in the slums. But truth is a liability. It can be championed only at cost. Therefore victors of society, with more to lose, always have more to gain by avoiding truth. Therefore Jesus could say, "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." And therefore we can say with a fair degree of accuracy that while the rich have given us our standards of taste it has generally been the poor who have told us what is right and wrong."

Now the good news is that Zacchaeus was able to receive the Lord with joy in his heart. The good news is that this "wee-little" man was able to trust himself – his life – to this new reality Jesus was presenting him with. The good news is that if it happened to Zacchaeus, it can happen to us!
Amen