

PENTECOST PROPER 26 C 2010

When I was a young, say 6 or 7 years old, I used to love the passage that I just read. The first thing that grabbed my attention was that Zacchaeus is said to be short in stature. As one of the more vertically-challenged kids in my elementary school class, I instantly identified with him. I had visions of him jumping up and down like a springer spaniel in order to see over the taller folks in front. I also resonated with his child-like eagerness and excitement as he dashed ahead of the crowd, and scrambled up a sycamore tree. A good choice; they are perfect for climbing. And I thought it was so cool that Jesus spotted Zacchaeus there in the tree, and called out to him by name even though they had never met. But the part that I liked the best is what comes next. My mom tells me that whenever this passage was mentioned in Sunday school or at church, I would parade around the house for days afterwards saying: "Zacchaeus you better come down from that tree because I'm gonna hang out at your place tonight."

I still love the story, and for all the same reasons. I am still short. I am still impressed by Zacchaeus's eagerness and inventiveness. I continue to be moved by the fact that Jesus singles him out to show him some love. And above all I am struck by how boldly Jesus invites himself over for dinner. He does not wait for a formal invitation. Or even a casual, noncommittal offer such as "we should do lunch someday." Instead Jesus says: "As soon as I finish working the crowd here, I'm gonna show up at your doorstep, so if you don't want me to see how messy your house usually is, you better run on ahead and straighten up a bit." Jesus does not say "I'd *like* to come stay with you," or even "I *will* come stay with you." He says "I *must* come stay." I must, because that is who I am. I must because that is what I do. I "seek out and save the lost."

Jesus is always seeking us out, but we have to be willing to receive him, even if it makes us look foolish or gullible or not entirely rational. In darting ahead of the crowd and shimmying up the sycamore tree, Zacchaeus was willing to jettison the professional image that he had cultivated as the chief tax collector of Jericho, and was willing to step, or perhaps I should say *climb*, way outside of his comfort zone in order to see Jesus and hear what he had to say. We don't know what exactly motivated Zacchaeus. Perhaps he was feeling an emptiness in his life. Perhaps he had heard that Jesus looked with kindness upon those who are disdained, reviled, or marginalized. Or perhaps he just wanted to see what all the fuss was about.

Whatever his motivation, Zacchaeus makes himself available for Jesus to come walking into his life. He then welcomes Jesus, and is utterly transformed. His eyes are opened, his heart is unbound, his mind expanded. He finds that he can no longer take refuge in the justifications and rationalizations that up to then had allowed him to be at peace with his ill-gotten wealth, and so he decides to repay those whom he has defrauded, returning four times the amount he fleeced from them. He decides, as well, to use half of his wealth to those who are poor. He does this not because it is required of him, but out of gratitude for Christ's presence in his life, and sheer delight that he can play a role in furthering God's mission on earth. He is transformed, from observer to seeker to disciple. Gift begets gift. Passion begets passion. Mission begets mission.

Zacchaeus's stands in marked contrast to the religious leaders of Sodom and Gomorrah who are featured in this morning's Old Testament lesson. They were only too happy to sing God's praises, to engage in elaborate acts of personal piety, to gather for frequently worship, and to attend with great care to every aspect of the liturgy. They just weren't too keen on letting God do what God does, namely transform us. It was as if all of their to'ing and fro'ing, all of their bowing and scraping, all of their exquisite attention to the forms of worship amounted to a grand bargain. "We will lavish attention and praise on you, O Lord, so long as you, in return, do not look too closely into our hearts."

It fell to the prophet Isaiah to deliver the news that God was not interested in such a bargain. "Hear the word of the Lord! ... I have had enough of burnt offerings Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. ... I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen."

Ouch! What on earth could have justified such a rebuke? Simply this, that the religious leaders of Sodom and Gomorrah tried to substitute religiosity for righteous living. The root of their sinfulness – and of all sinfulness – was that they sought to have it their way. They sought to put their will ahead of God's. The

sought to put themselves on a par with God. And then when things got a little shaky, they sought to make amends by giving God a peace offering. “We may be making a mess of our lives,” they seemed to say, “but look at the great sacrifices we are offering up to you.” God’s response is simple and straightforward. You want to impress me? Change your ways. “Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (Isaiah 1:16-17).

Whether we are perched in a sycamore tree or sitting in an oak pew, whether we are hearing the word for the first time or have been called to be an elder in the church, the message this morning is clear: when we truly allow God into our lives, we are no longer the same. Something changes deep within us. We can no longer carry on as before. We are transformed. Like Zacchaeus.

After Zacchaeus volunteers to make restitution to those he has harmed and to provide for those who are poor, Jesus says “Today salvation has come to this house.” At first glance, it almost sounds as if Zacchaeus is being rewarded for his promised good works. Not so. Zacchaeus is saved because of his faith. We know this from last week’s Gospel lesson. Think back to that other tax collector, the one we encountered in the preceding chapter of Luke. Those of you who were here or who read the lesson on your own will recall that last week’s parable featured *two* characters, an unnamed tax collector and a self-important Pharisee. The Pharisee fasts twice a week and tithes 10% of his income to the synagogue. Yet he is not saved, because his piety and his pledging is purely formalistic. He follows all the rules and does everything that is expected of him, but his heart remains walled off. He praises God to highest heaven, but does not let God come inside here. As for the tax collector in the parable, we know nothing about how often he shows up in the synagogue or how much he puts in the plate, but we do know that he is awed to be in God’s presence, admits the error of his ways, and humbly seeks God’s mercy. And for this, Jesus says, he is assured salvation.

So then, returning to Zacchaeus, it is because he is saved that he gives, [repeat] it is because he is saved that he gives, and not the other way around. When he allows Jesus into his life and is thereby transformed, he is filled with a deep and abiding sense of gratitude and delight. When we allow Jesus into our lives and we

realize just how hard God is working to lead us into righteousness, we *too* are filled with gratitude and delight. Gratitude that we are seen, and known, and loved. Delight that God wants more for us and better for us than we could ever ask or imagine. And with this sense of gratitude and delight comes an understanding that all that we have, and all that we are, is a gift from God. A pure gift, entrusted to us for the sake of the Gospel. A gift that is to be freely shared, in the name of the One whose generosity and grace are boundless. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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