

Sermon, October 30, 2022

Luke 19:1-10

“Jesus and Zacchaeus”

In his travels Jesus arrives at the city of Jericho. At that time Jericho was an important trade hub and was a major exporter of dates and balsam - thus, it was a very wealthy city.

Jesus' reputation had obviously preceded him because there was a sizable crowd gathered to meet him. Among them was a man named Zacchaeus, a tax collector, in fact, the city's chief tax collector. I mention Jericho's wealth because it made it an important taxation center.

As the text tells us, Zacchaeus climbed a sycamore tree. He was certainly anxious to see Jesus, and we are told that he climbed the tree because he was short of stature. But was that the only reason?

We are not told how Jesus knew his name, but he called out to him and insisted that he would be staying at his house that day. This upsets those gathered there, saying, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner”. Why are they upset, and why do they call Zacchaeus a sinner? Well, because in Israel at that time it was considered very offensive to eat or drink with a tax collector, as well as others considered to be ritually unclean. In fact, it was a matter of law that observant Jews had to be separated from those perceived as sinners. Why did tax collectors fall into that category? Because they collected taxes on behalf of the Roman government, therefore making them collaborators with the oppressor! They were also known to take advantage of the people by collecting more than was actually due to enrich themselves. And, so, tax collectors were not only sinning against God, but they were sinning against their neighbors as well. That may be another reason why Zacchaeus climbed the tree. He did not want to mingle with a crowd that despised him! It could have been dangerous for him to do so.

But Jesus saw things differently, and this was far from being the first time he was criticized for sitting at table with tax collectors, prostitutes, drunkards, etc. Whatever sins they may have been guilty of, he obviously saw something good in them, and, as was usual for him, mercy and compassion trumped the law. As it states in the 3rd chapter of John, “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world, but in order that the world may be saved through him”.

He also had a problem with the whole idea of the unclean and passed that on to his disciples. In the tenth chapter of Acts, Peter was in the house of a man named Cornelius, and says to a group gathered there, “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile, but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or

unclean.” Judgement belongs to God alone, and the good news is that we are judged by the One who loves us beyond measure! This is the essence of God’s grace!

At the end of today’s reading we hear, “For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost”. That is good news, but what did he mean when speaking of those who are lost? It is common for Christians to equate being lost with being damned or doomed - condemned to an eternity in hell. But that is not really what is meant by the word ‘lost’ in the New Testament. Literally, it means, ‘in the wrong place’. Of course, that can mean being physically in the wrong place, but it can also mean being in the wrong place mentally, emotionally, morally, or spiritually. It can mean finding oneself in a wilderness, sometimes of our own making, perhaps even feeling alienated from our own true self.

If we see being lost in that sense, then we have to reconsider what it means to be saved. Rather than having found an all-expense paid trip to heaven, it’s about finding one’s way out of whatever wilderness we may find ourselves in. That the Son of Man came to show us a better way, to find our better self, to find a closer and more intimate relationship with our God.

Consider for example the 18th century Anglican clergyman, named John Newton, who wrote the hymn, “Amazing Grace”. As you may know, he was once involved in the slave trade, but through encounters with God’s amazing grace, he saw the light, and changed his ways. He even became an abolitionist. As the opening of the hymn says, “Amazing grace how sweet the sound/ that saved a wretch like me/ I once was lost, but now I’m found/ was blind but now I see”. Again, his eyes were opened to a better way, a more ethical and spiritual way of being in the world. In other words , he was saved.

I can testify to this on a personal level, having been, years ago, lost in the wilderness of alcoholism, as well as moving in other self- destructive ways, but in a moment of crisis I encountered the Living Christ, and I can now truthfully say, “ I once was lost but now I’m found, was blind but now I see”. In and through Jesus Christ, I was saved!

Amen.

Let us pray: Gracious Lord, always loving, merciful, and kind, we thank you for this beautiful day, and the many blessings that come with it. We know that you have our best interests at heart and are willing to shine a light when we are lost in the dark, and we pray for all those who have lost their way, who yearn to find a way out of the wilderness of self-doubt and self-destruction, of addiction, of depression, of loneliness, and a sense of hopelessness. May we all come to know the depths of your amazing grace.

We also thank you for the gifts you bestow, thinking today, especially, for the gift of music, which has the power to lift our hearts, to inspire, to open our ears and our spirit to the sound of beauty. And we thank you for all who share that gift through their talents and through their hearts.

As always, Lord, we pray for the sick and the dying, as well as those who have passed on. We remember to you the alienated, the marginalized, and oppressed, and we pray for peace in our homes, our communities, our places of worship, our nation, and the world. Amen.