

The First United Church of Christ
November 3, 2019
Sermon Title: "Out on a Limb"

Luke 19:1-10

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."

This Gospel of Luke gives us one lesson after the other about God's surprising love. Last week, we read about the Pharisee and the tax collector in the temple. Before that we read about the ten that were cured of leprosy and how only the one foreigner - the Samaritan came back to show gratefulness. Luke also gave us the story of the persistent widow seeking justice from the unjust judge. Luke offers the account of the prodigal son and also, the parable of the foolish rich man that tore down his barns to build bigger better ones only to die that very night.

Luke offers the deep and abiding teachings of Jesus that give us clear instruction about what we need to pay attention to in our lives. Don't judge others, be humble, persist in your spiritual journey, and seek to love as God seeks to find and love us - even when we are lost or have "lost it." Oh, and by the way, God does not play favorites; God doesn't judge you on where you came from or what you have. Here is a quote from the Apostle Paul in the Message translation. "If you go against the grain, you get splinters, regardless of which neighborhood you're from, what your parents taught you, what schools you attended. But if you embrace the way God does things, there are wonderful payoffs, again without regard to where you are from or how you were brought up. Being a Jew won't give you an automatic stamp of

approval. God pays no attention to what others say (or what you think) about you. He makes up his own mind. If you sin without knowing what you're doing, God takes that into account. But if you sin knowing full well what you're doing, that's a different story entirely. Merely hearing God's law is a waste of your time if you don't do what he commands. Doing, not hearing, is what makes the difference with God."ⁱ

Zacchaeus was a tax collector and not only a "tax collector" but the chief tax collector and he was wealthy. A tax collector was despised especially by the Jewish population because they represented the Roman Empire and oppression. Most tax collectors were thieves. They paid a fixed sum of money to the Roman Empire and then collected much more from the people. Zacchaeus, this little, cheating, tree climbing, chief of the tax collectors completely changes and makes amends for the wrong he has done. Had Jesus not risked being "seen" with this man, Zacchaeus may not have made this 180 degree turn in his life. Jesus dared to step out and embrace even the most despised of that day and Zacchaeus, you might say, went out on a limb too.

Could this happen in our world today? Are there people you know that might be considered an "outcast?" or at the very least someone you would not consider open to religious talk? Maybe someone who is adamant that God does not exist or is on the fence about a higher being? Maybe they scoff at your weekly visits to bible study or Sunday service. Maybe there are people in your life that have never had someone dare to show interest in their spiritual growth and well-being. That was Zacchaeus and Jesus dared to approach. Why? Because Jesus trusted that as long as his efforts were in line with God's will, he would never lose. Deaf ears or no deaf ears, Jesus wasn't afraid to plant the seed even if it was rejected. Jesus trusted his divine nature.

That kind of trust is huge. What if your life had not been touched by someone along the way - would you be here? Might you have been considered an outcast at some point? An outsider of the church? Going in the wrong direction? Focused on the world and all its trappings and not giving God a second thought? Every day of your life, you come in contact with people that are lost; God's children that are treading water in an attempt to make sense of life. Maybe their name is not Zacchaeus but they too are loved and sought after by God. What are you afraid of? Saying the wrong thing? Being considered a "Holy Roller?" Having your invitation be rejected?

I am going to guess that Jesus' disciples would not have reached out to Zacchaeus. I would guess that they thought he was unsalvageable or at the very least, not interested. Look around in your own life - who have you considered an outsider? an outcast? Jesus sought Zacchaeus out, called him out of his tree and invited himself to his home. The outcome, according to Luke, was a changed life.

God's way, God's time, God's perspective is different than ours. God sees the inner depths of each one's heart; the writer of Hebrews puts it like this, "For the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God. Everything is naked and exposed before his eyes, and he is the one to whom we are accountable."ⁱⁱⁱ We might have all the fancy equipment to search the human body: MRIs, CAT Scans, X-rays, blood work but no one can know the inner workings of the human heart and spirit. No one can know the struggles, the joys, the fears, the propensities that pull us from God's way. God knows the heart and God knows the hole in the heart that only a relationship with God can fill. Zacchaeus' curiosity tells us that he had cracked the door of his heart open. The people in the crowd didn't notice nor did they care; they judged the external shell. And as Zacchaeus had gone out on a limb to see Jesus, Jesus metaphorically went out on a limb in the eyes of his disciples and the crowd present to reach Zacchaeus.

Which makes me think of this lovely story.

*The Master was searching for a vessel to use.
On the shelf there were many, which one would he choose?
Take me cried the gold one, I'm shiny and bright.
I'm of great value and I do things just right.
My beauty and luster will outshine the rest,
And for you, Master, gold would be the best.
The Master passed on with no word at all.
He looked at a silver urn, narrow and tall.
I'll serve you dear Master, I'll pour out your wine,
And I'll be at your table whenever you dine,
My lines are so graceful, my carvings so true,
And my silver will always compliment you.
Unheeding, the Master passed on to the brass,
It was wide mouthed and shallow, and polished like glass.
Here, Here cried the vessel, I know I will do.
Place me on your table for all men to view.*

*"Look at me" cried the goblet of crystal so clear.
"My transparency shows the contents I bear.
Though fragile I am, I will serve you with pride.
And I'm sure I'll be happy in your home to abide."
The Master came next to a vessel of wood.
Polished and carved, it solidly stood.
"You may use me dear Master," the wooden bowl said,
But I'd rather you used me for fruit, not for bread!"
Then the Master looked down and saw a vessel of clay.
Empty and broken, it helplessly lay,
No hope had the vessel that the Master might choose,
To cleanse and make whole, to fill and to use.
Ah! This is the vessel I've been hoping to find,
I will mend and use it and make it all mine.
I need not the vessel with pride of itself.
Nor the one that is narrow to sit on the shelf.
Nor the one that is big mouthed, and shallow and loud.
Nor one who displays his contents so proud.
Nor the one who thinks he can do all things right.
But this plain earthy vessel filled with my power and might,
Then He lifted the vessel of clay
Mended and cleansed it and filled it that day.
Spoke to it kindly, "There's work you must do
Just pour out to others as I pour into you. (Source unknown)*

Who is it in your life, who is it in my life that I disregard because I think "ah, he or she wouldn't be interested, religion is just not their thing." Or maybe it's because I'm afraid of being rejected. Who is it that I should invite in, into my joy, into my belief, into my church? I can think of a few. Maybe it's time that I - you "go out on a limb." Maybe, it's the right time and the right place. Maybe, I'll take a risk and plant a seed and maybe someday their curiosity will get the best of them and Jesus will be there to invite himself in.

Let's think about that. Amen.

ⁱ Romans 2:11-13 The Message translation

ⁱⁱ Hebrews 4:11-13 New Living Translation