

“Looking to See”

Valley Presbyterian Church – March 21, 2021

5th Sunday of Lent

Psalm 84:1-4, 10-12

Rev. John Wahl

Luke 18:35 – 19:10

Zacchaeus was a wee little man; and a wee little man was he. You might know this song from Sunday School or church summer camp. But, exactly, how little was the tax collector? Was he shorter than average: the size of a gymnast or jockey? Or would he have been so diminutive to be considered a dwarf or little person; able to walk under this communion table? Or more like a character from *Honey, I Shrank the Kids*, tiny enough to slip into my pocket? Or even small enough, possibly, to pass through the eye of a needle?

You see, we really cannot read about Zacchaeus without thinking of Luke’s story of the rich young ruler in the previous chapter; the righteous one who follows all the commandments, but when challenged by Jesus to give away all that he owned to the poor, walks away disheartened. The disciples respond by asking, “who, then, can be saved?”

Who can enter the kingdom? Is it only those who give away all their money? We are left hoping the answer is ‘no’ because, along with many others, though I might not consider myself to be rich, I am far from penniless.

Normally, Zacchaeus is presented as a bad person, a corrupt man, someone who – as chief tax collector – has grown very wealthy by defrauding others and collaborating with the Roman occupation of Israel. And so, his encounter with Jesus is understood as a conversion story, with his decision to give away half his money and to repay those he defrauded as evidence of his repentance and salvation. And the version of the Bible that we use here, the New Revised Standard Version, certainly translates the story this way:

Zacchaeus...said to the Lord, “Look, half 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.”

But the difficulty is that this statement, in the original Greek, is not in the future tense, it is in the present. In other words, Zacchaeus is not promising to change his ways from here on in; rather, he is explaining that this is already his practice. The RSV captures it much better:

“Behold, Lord, the half of my good I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it four-fold.”

He is not a bad man who repents; rather, he’s a man trying desperately to be good in the midst of a financial system that tends toward corruption at every turn; devoting the wealth he had – beyond what he needed to get by – to both lift up those going without around him and also to make restitution to all he had wronged.

Zacchaeus was a wee little man; a wee little man was he. Because of his position in life, his reputation was diminished in the eyes of those around him. Maybe that was why he climbed up the sycamore tree; because he had heard that Jesus of Nazareth, who was passing through town, had his own reputation of embracing and accepting sinners and tax collectors: those people that the society around them considered to be unworthy and corrupt. Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus, and also to be seen by Jesus: not for what others assumed he was, or for what he might one day become, but for the righteous man he was already trying to be.

In reading the gospels, we associate the word “see” with noticing and acknowledging what is real, as opposed to a perception that is not true. Awareness and understanding go far deeper than simply seeing.

And so, Zacchaeus climbed up the tree, rising above the crowd that had condemned and written him off; setting the stage for his encounter with Jesus, the scene so beloved by Sunday School teachers through the years. Their eyes meet and Jesus tells him to hurry down, for he would come to his house that day.

The visit of Jesus to the house of Zacchaeus was an intentional breaking down of barriers that had kept this wee man apart from his community. For Jesus to eat with him, to break bread with him, was to impart upon him an honor that no one else would grant. Salvation comes in the form of this restoration of a man with a community that had rejected him. Having resources can, indeed, be a barrier to faith, but it does not have to be: bearing fruit means using what you have for good and living justly with others.¹

The contrast with the rich young ruler couldn’t be clearer: this man was publicly holy and visibly righteous; the kind of man others would look up to as an example of someone who had it all and did everything right. And yet, when he was confronted with Christ’s call, he discovered that his love of money kept him from entering the kingdom. On the other hand, Zacchaeus was shunned by his own people, looked down on as a small man, looked up to by no one. And yet, when he

¹ Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bibleworm Podcast*

was met by Christ, he discovered that his generosity and humility attested to his righteousness far more than any public display of holiness ever could have done.²

Maybe you also remember from church camp or Sunday School being asked to put on a blindfold to realize that when you cannot see, your other senses are heightened; that you are able to understand far more about what is taking place around you than your eyes are able to perceive. Just prior to today's reading, Jesus tells his disciples – for a third time – that he must go to Jerusalem where he will be arrested and die, only to rise again after three days. But his followers are not able to understand; Luke tells us that “what he said was hidden from them.” They will not comprehend what Jesus has been telling them until they have seen the resurrection themselves.

As Jesus was approaching Jericho there was a blind beggar sitting by the side of the road. When he heard what was happening, the man shouted out, “Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me;” which could simply mean, “can you spare some money?” Those around Jesus sternly order the man to be quiet, but he shouts out a second time. Jesus stops and orders the blind man to be brought before him, and asks “what do you want me to do for you?” Jesus does not assume what having mercy means; he wants to hear for himself what the blind man wants.

Somehow, the blind beggar has faith enough to ask Jesus to be healed of his blindness; a faith through which he is able to perceive who Jesus is and to ask for what he truly needs. Maybe this man knew the mercy of others who had helped him before, because it takes courage to ask for help. Humility can be an expression of belief in a world that the good news of the gospel envisions: a world where even the hungry can be fed, the broken can be healed, the imprisoned can be set free, and the blind can be given sight.

This is the first story about healing of blindness that takes place in Luke's gospel; a vision of the coming kingdom that Jesus had announced in the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. He tells the man, “Receive your sight; your faith has saved you.” Salvation here again means a restoration to the wholeness that God imagines for us in community with one another. If we all acted as if the kingdom were real, it would indeed come closer to us.

The senseless murder that took place earlier this week in Georgia, leaving eight innocent people dead, has brought to our attention a community of people that are desperately seeking to be seen and heard. Over the past year, the number of racially motivated hate crimes against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders has been on the rise; an insidious racist trend that has created a climate of injustice and

² Simon Woodman, “How Small Was Zacchaeus?”

fear. Even when the perpetrators of violence cannot see their own motivations, we – as a society – must stand beside those being victimized and oppressed. In order for our community to become whole, we must stand alongside those who have the courage to ask for help. We must join with Jesus in promoting justice and restoration.

For, as much as we desire to be a community that does not discriminate based on gender, race, income level, sexual orientation or perceived disability, we are still prone to stigmatization: assuming the least and worst of people. In Jesus, we see the example of one who will not pass by those who have the courage to call out for help – or climb up to get a better vantage point – but instead stops to offer healing, welcome, and acceptance. In Jesus' way, we find a gracious assurance that all are loved and accepted and welcomed into the kingdom of God.

And so, we all come as we are: little people and towers of faith, sinners and the righteous, the poor and the wealthy, the holy and the compromised; people of every age, race, experience, and circumstance. We come before Jesus not because of what we have done or failed to do, but instead because we all need mercy and help. As we see Jesus, we are invited to welcome him into our lives, and salvation comes to our house, also, as our eyes are opened to the possibilities of a life lived in generosity and grace; and a community that is made more whole through the welcome and acceptance of our neighbors.

And we are reminded that just as Zacchaeus climbed up the sycamore tree, *for the Lord he wanted to see*; Jesus likewise was raised upon the tree of Calvary for us – for our salvation. In this great act of sacrifice, we are inspired and encouraged to give of ourselves for the sake of others: for their safety and well-being; for their welcome, acceptance and full inclusion into community; for the sake of the kingdom that is coming, and which we are called to bring closer even still. Amen.