

Leaving the Vivid Air Signed With Honor

^{NRS} Luk 19:1 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."

“Zacchaeus was a wee little man, a wee little man was he.” This is just a great story isn’t it? On the surface it’s just such a funny story. People are so serious in the church, it’s really important to remember there are some incredibly funny moments in the Bible. Here you’ve got this short little Danny DeVito character running around- something rich men don’t do. And then when he’s trying to get a peek at Jesus and everybody’s in the way, he doesn’t take no for an answer. No, he climbs up this big sycamore tree so he can get a better look- something rich men definitely don’t do! This is one of the few images in the New Testament that strikes us as funny and odd as it would have Luke’s audience, and one of the very few instances of physical comedy in all the Bible. Scott Cameron- this story is for YOU! ☺

I remember at my home church, at Emmanuel, one of our members enacted this role during Jim’s sermon on Zacchaeus. You have to understand I come from a very strange church tradition- Emmanuel was equal parts silly and serious. Pastor Jim with the help of a bizarre cast of others created moments of incredible hilarity only to follow it up a truly powerful moments. It wasn’t everyone’s cup of tea, but it was the church where I realized I could be myself and go to church- the goofy parts of me were welcome

along with the serious. So Jim was preaching on Zaccheaus when ol' Alton Stockton, climbed up on one of the chairs in the choir and then climbed up on the wall somehow and started shouting. Now, Alton happened to be on the short side, and he happened to be a banker- a very wealthy person at least in our congregation. And he was way up there hanging off the wall as Jim was preaching, and he plays Zacchaeus to the hilt and starts shouting "Jesus! Jesus! Over here Jesus!" And no matter how Jim tried to get in the way, Alton just kept shouting. Honestly it was the most awake I think I've ever seen Alton in church before.

Now, when the moment had passed and we had quieted down, Jim finished his sermon telling us not to let anything, especially the church and people in the church, get in the way of our relationship with God and to climb trees if we have to. Yes it was funny- but that's a very serious point. And I'll tell you I was probably 15 when I heard that sermon- and it's still with me. I once asked Jim about his strange ways- he said people never listen so carefully as when they are done laughing, which is probably why Jesus told such funny stories. That's stayed with me, too.

Of course it's not an entirely funny story, is it? As I was working with the text this week I was surprised at how funny it seemed at first to me, but then how serious it started to seem after reading it through more and more. Take Zacchaeus. There's very serious about him climbing up that tree, isn't there- desperate even. I started thinking about those bankers in the 30's in the Great Depression climbing up those tall bank buildings and running and smashing through those windows unable to bear losing everything. Zacchaeus didn't just *want* to see Jesus- it was like he *had* to. It's not funny

to be in the grip of this kind of need- even when it's something positive like seeking Christ.

And the crowd isn't funny either, is it? No, the crowd is truly ugly here. They've all turned out to see Jesus- so you'd think they'd be people at least a little bit interested in his message of forgiveness, mercy, and grace. But when they see him stop under that sycamore tree and start talking to *that* man, and that Zacchaeus actually responds- they aren't happy that a brother has found his way again. They aren't happy at all that Jesus is reaching out to someone, to someone else, to someone the regular church wouldn't touch- no they grumble. "Look," they say to each other shaking their heads, "Jesus is going off with that sinner." This is such a strange line to me- I mean it's Jesus. The only people he seems to like with any regularity are those whose sins are too heavy to hide any more. Going to the house of a sinner? Where *else* would he be going? But the crowd is like the church- we want Jesus to care about others, sure, but only so far, right? I mean we wouldn't want to let everyone in, right? What would happen to our club?

But the thing is, the crowd actually has a point here. You know the reason they don't like him is not that Zacchaeus is merely rich- you could just chalk that up to envy or to prejudice. No, it's the nasty way he comes by his money. Zacchaeus was a tax collector- and not only a tax collector, but a chief tax collector, which is the only time this term is used in the whole NT. Tax collectors are hated and considered unclean- not merely because they come in regular contact with Gentiles, which they do, but because of how they go about their business.

The tax system in the Roman world is great- if you're Rome. People who complain about the IRS should really do some reading about how bad it really could be. The way Rome levied taxes was the Ceaser simply told a governor of a region how much tribute he owed- and then the governor would pay this tribute out from his own treasury immediately. Then, in order to fill that treasury back up again, the governor would send his tax collectors, backed by soldiers, out to collect. He didn't care how the money came in- just so long as it came in, if you catch my drift. Remember, the mafia was born in Italy- they know how to get their money.

And it wasn't just violence that was the problem, but graft. See, tax collectors like Zacchaeus, in order to be a tax collector it was a little bit like buying a franchise- to have the rights to collect taxes, Zacchaeus would also pay the governor a large fee for the right to collect taxes, and then it was up to him to out and beat the streets. And he's got soldiers with him, so he can collect whatever amount he wanted, so don't bother about hiring an accountant if you don't like how much he's telling you you owe him, don't bother with your little shoe box of receipts, you're going to pay whatever he tells you you're going to pay- and if you don't, he's got lefty and scar face back there just itching for a fight. So tax collectors were notorious for over collecting and becoming incredibly rich- just like our friend Zacchaeus, here.

So really, the crowd has a point, don't they? It's not that they just didn't like Zacchaeus- but he was doing some really terrible things to people. He was hurting people, extorting people, and getting rich off it. I mean it's unjust. But of all the people in the crowd Jesus stops and talks to him? To him??? What sense does *that* make? How is this fair?

But that's just it. It isn't fair. It isn't fair- and this is really good news. See, Jesus isn't about being fair. He's about something so much better. He's about grace. He's about grace that comes to us before we've straightened up and are flying right, the grace that comes to us *before* we deserve it. As Paul puts it- while we were still sinners, not angels, Christ died for us. And Jesus says it himself here- he doesn't come to be the mascot of the nice and the well behaved and those who are really doing just fine on their own thank you very much- no Jesus comes to seek out and save the lost. He comes for the least, the last, and the lost, which, whether you realize it or not, includes every single one of us if we're being at all honest.

Speaking of every single one of us- that's what today is about, isn't it- All Saint's Day? I know technically it's not all saints day today, that's always November 1st, but today's the day we're celebrating here. All Saints Day. I wonder what you think about when you hear the word saint? I know the word Saint makes a lot of us Protestants nervous, but it shouldn't. Calvin's disagreements with saints in the Roman Catholic tradition is merely an argument over the number- in Calvin's eyes the medieval Roman Catholic church was just way too stingy. Who are the saints according to Reformed theology? All of us are. All of us are, you and me and everyone else in this quirky place.

And we say this now and again, "all saints", we give the odd hospital or two this name, but we don't really believe it. Everybody a saint? Come on. We aren't spiritual enough. We don't pray enough. We aren't nice enough. And many of us carry around much heavier burdens- we know the things we've said that we can never take back. We

know the way we've hurt others. All saints? Most of us would settle for meeting just one or two? But you know what? Being saint isn't about who we are in our eyes- it's about who we are in God's eyes. Our eyes are so weak. They see the negative so often- they see what's wrong, what we don't like. God sees differently- God sees the promise, the hope in you and me. That's why God sent Christ in the first place- because God saw something worth saving- even Zacchaeus. Even you and me.

Soon after 9-11 I heard a sermon given by Linda Loving, an amazing preacher and pastor. She was also talking about saints- but not the thin, ascetic, wispy, churchy saints always talking about God this and God that. No, she was talking about a different kind of saint- men and woman who would never consider themselves saints, men and women who work for a living, the men and women who served in the New York police and fire departments. She noticed that some say when they went into those towers on 9-11 they ran to their deaths. She reminded us that they were really running into their lives. They were running after their God given call to serve their neighbor, to lay down their lives for people they didn't even know. They weren't running to their deaths- they were running to their lives, they were doing what they were made to do. And not one of them, she said, would've called themselves a saint. No New York cop thinks of themselves as a saint. But that's exactly what they were. Now before they woke up on that bright, clear terrible morning God already saw them as such, and now the rest of us do, too.

It reminds me of Stephen Spender's poem entitled "I Think Continually of Those Who Are Great":

Near the snow, near the sun, in the highest fields,

See how these names are (celebrated) by the waving grass
And by the streamers of white cloud
And whispers of wind in the listening sky,
The names of those who in their lives fought for life,
Who wore at their hearts the fire's centre.
Born of the sun, they travelled a short while toward the sun,
And left the vivid air signed with their honour

Beloved, the church is not a club for those who get it, the church is the body of
Christ made up of broken people blessed to be a blessing- blessed to tell all the world that
in Christ, we're all saints now. Our job today and this week is to live the truth that all of
us, even Zacchaeus, are born to leave the vivid air signed with honor. What do you say,
saints? May God bless us all this day, no exceptions. **Amen.**