First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

October 30, 2022

Generosity and Salvation

Luke 19:1-10

**19**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.”

I chuckle every time this reading comes up in the lectionary, partly because this is one of the few places in the entire Bible that goes so far as to describe someone’s height. And being, as one friend puts it, freakishly tall I can relate, in reverse, to Zaccheaus’ predicament.

When I was in elementary school, we’d always get lined up by height to march into the cafeteria for lunch. I was always, always, at the end of the line and it never failed that they’d run out of desert before I got to a chance to get some. Always; never failed, every single day. It’s probably why I tend to eat desert first, now that I’m an adult.

I’ll share one more story about height, before we dive into today’s reading. About two or three weeks after I started here, someone came up to me and said that we should raise the top of the pulpit up, because I LOOM over it. I laughed and told them that it was the perfect height, because the distance was exactly right for me not to have to wear my reading glasses when I’m preaching. So, no need to raise it on my account.

Now, Zacchaeus had a couple of strikes against him. Not only was he shorter than the average person of his day, he was also a tax collector. And not just a tax collector, but the chief tax collector of Jericho, which made him a very rich man.

Tax collectors, during the Roman occupation, were responsible for making sure that 80% of any money earned by the local population was collected and sent to Rome. They were considered to be the lowest of the low, by just about everyone, because they were collaborators with a brutal occupation. Zacchaeus, in his role as chief tax collector, became rich because he was skimming off some of the tax revenue that was supposed to go to Rome. Not only was he a collaborator, he was also stealing from his bosses. This is not a recipe for popularity, that’s for sure.

So, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and is passing through Jericho, which is about 15 miles outside of the Holy City. Zacchaeus is curious; who is this guy who is rumored to be the Messiah? When Jesus comes into Jericho, Zacchaeus wants to see, but because of his short stature, he can’t see over the crowds. Nobody is going to help him or give him the opportunity to get to the front of the crowd of course, and honestly, why would they? He’s a traitor and despised by his fellow countrymen. Zacchaeus has to get creative, if he’s going to see Jesus, so he goes and climbs a tree to get a better view.

Jesus sees Zacchaeus hanging out in the tree and, calling him by name, tells him to hurry up and come down, because “I need to stay at your house today.” Zacchaeus is overjoyed and hurries down to welcome Jesus. This isn’t at all what Zacchaeus is expecting. He just wants to get a glimpse of Jesus, that’s all.

The locals aren’t happy about this at all. In verse 7, we read, “All who saw it began to grumble and said,” “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” Jesus, isn’t having any of it though. In verse 10, we see the entire summation of Jesus’ ministry when he tells the crowd, “For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

One point here, that’s worth mentioning. Jesus is reminding the crowd that he isn’t the one who will raise up an army to defeat the Roman occupiers. This is what many, if not most, of Jesus’ followers were looking for, but that’s not the mission.

On the surface, this simple story seems like a repentance/salvation story. In verse 8, we hear Zacchaeus telling Jesus, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I will pay back four times as much.” The writer of Luke’s gospel, focuses quite a bit on the interplay between wealth and how it’s used, or not used, to care for the poor and needy. It’s a reoccurring theme throughout the entire gospel. Wealth was seen as a sign of God’s favor and while Luke makes it very clear that there’s nothing wrong with having wealth, it’s how that wealth is put to use that become the basis for much of what Luke is trying to say.

Is verse 8 Zacchaeus’s way of thanking Jesus for bringing him in from the cold margins of the societal rejection which he experienced because of his past actions? Is it a tit for tat situation? That’s certainly one way to look at it. I wonder, though, if there’s another way to look at this entire story.

Is it possible the message here is that no one, ourselves included, stands beyond salvation and that no one, ourselves included, stands unworthy of the love and grace of God, embodied in the teachings of Jesus?

Zaccheaus is short, both physically and morally. He is definitely someone who is lost. Yet, Jesus calls him by name and makes a point of showing grace to a someone who society has placed beyond the pale and Zaccheaus’ response to the realization that even someone like himself isn’t beyond God’s love, is entirely appropriate.

We don’t know what happed to Zaccheaus after Jesus moved on. We don’t know if he gave up his tax collector gig and took up farming or weaving or whatever. We don’t even know if he kept his promise to give half of everything he owned to the poor. I suspect that Luke wants us to assume that everything was hunky dory after Jesus left Jericho, but we really don’t know. The story is left unfinished.

Perhaps, that was deliberate. Perhaps, Luke’s audience and, by extension, we ourselves in the twenty-first century, are being called to finish the story. And what would the end of this story be, if that’s the case? If the meaning of the story is, as I believe, that no one is beyond the reach of God’s love, how will that affect the ending which we seem to be called to write?

I suspect all of you know how to finish this story. I know that you all know that God has no hands or feet but ours and that we are commanded by none other than Christ himself, to seek out and help the lost and those on the margins.

Finishing the story means we do just that. Finishing the story means understanding that we are called to do whatever we can to help those who are lost and on the margins feel the all encompassing love that God offers to all.

To be sure, the response to our efforts may not be what we hope for. Zaccheaus certainly wasn’t expecting the response he received for his efforts. Finishing the story isn’t about getting the response that we want. The response may be joy or it may be rejection and how others response isn’t really the point.

Finishing the story starts with the realization that no one is beyond the pale, no one is beyond saving, and no one is undeserving of God’s love and mercy. Not one single person. Our job is to share the infinite love and mercy that God has for God’s creation as far and as wide as possible. And that starts by realizing we are called to embrace and accept that God’s love and grace is even meant for ourselves. AMEN