

## WHAT DO YOU SEEK?

(06/27/2021)

Scripture Lesson: Luke 19:1-10

*“Then Jesus said to Zacchaeus, ‘Today salvation has come to this house . . . For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.’”* (Luke 19:9-10)

It feels strange to finally be here this morning, the first time in approximately sixteen months that we are meeting as the gathered church in this sanctuary for worship. Even though this building was closed because of the pandemic restrictions, we did not cease to be the church. In the words of that precious children’s song,

*I am the church,  
You are the church,  
We are the church together.*

If the church, at least the “invisible church” of which John Calvin spoke, is the point of intersection between God and creation, the point of intersection between the sacred and the secular, between the “vertical” and the “horizontal,” then the church can be anywhere. It is not limited to a special building. It can be in you. It can be in me. It can be in us, in our fellowship.

So here we are! It feels like such a long time since we have gathered in this sanctuary, and yet it seems like only yesterday. Our experience this morning reminds me of something that Luis Ponce de Leon said. Ponce de Leon, returning to his teaching position at his university following his imprisonment for five years by the Inquisition, is purported to have begun his lecture with the following words: “As we were saying yesterday, . . .”

So why are we here this morning? I believe we, like Zacchaeus, are here this morning because we are seeking something. We may not know that we are seeking something, but we are. We may not know what or whom it is that we seek, but we are seeking something or someone or both. And I think we have come to the right place!

Perhaps we are seeking the experience that is an integral part of what it means to be the invisible church on both an individual and a collective level, the amazing experience of ourselves as the point of intersection between God and God’s creation, the point of intersection between spirit and matter, God and the world, the sacred and the secular, the vertical and the horizontal. We seek the healing and self-actualization that comes from what the humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow called a peak experience, what the theologian Rudolf Otto called an experience of the numinous. This is what we seek in our moments of individual prayer and common worship. It is this that “recharges our batteries” for the week ahead.

We may or may not know what we seek. It may be something we once had and somehow, along the way, just lost. We also may not know what we seek; we may only have a

sense, an intuition that something is missing in our life. If you found the time to read my Keeping in (Virtual) Touch reflections over the past year, you will know that one of my favorite quotes about seeking is from the author and explorer Peter Matthiessen:

*Soon the child's clear eye is clouded over by ideas and opinions, preconceptions and abstractions. Simple free being becomes encrusted with the burdensome armor of the ego. Not until years later does an instinct come that a vital sense of mystery has been withdrawn. The sun glints through the pines, and the heart is pierced in a moment of beauty and strange pain, like a memory of paradise. After that day . . . we become seekers.*

We have all had the experience of looking for something and not being able to find it. I find this experience happens more often as I age. It's frustrating. I know it's somewhere, but where? I must confess that when my wife asks me where I last saw it or where I left it, I don't experience her suggestion as particularly helpful. If I knew where I left it, it wouldn't be lost!

We can spend a good deal of time looking for something. If we make a heartfelt appeal to St. Anthony, we can dramatically reduce the time spent on the search. I am a big fan of Saint Anthony, as was my mother-in-law, who prayed to him a lot, especially in her later years. However, if we think a little deeper; if we think of Saint Anthony as helping us find more than just misplaced car keys, he becomes one of our more valuable saints. You see, what we lost, what we seek may be more valuable than our car keys.

As Peter Matthiessen hints, we may be seeking something we once had but which has slipped away from us. This is a common experience of people who have lost a loved one. In addition to having lost someone who was a big part of your life, you may have also lost a sense of the meaning of your life. If you provided care for your loved one over the last years of his/her life, the care that you provided was not only a labor of love; it also provided you with a sense of value, of meaning. You knew that you were doing something that no one else could do, at least not the way you did it. Now that your loved one is no longer with you, you have lost both them and an important part of the purpose, meaning, and value of your life. I believe that this is at the root of the existential depression that so often accompanies grieving.

It is also possible that we are seeking something we never had. It is not that we had it and later lost or misplaced it; we never had it in the first place. This makes our search more difficult. Matthiessen hints at this when he says that this kind of search may begin with a dawning consciousness that something is missing in our life; there is something that we lack. To find out what we haven't had since early childhood, we need to set out on a search that has been described throughout history as a spiritual journey.

As Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, he passes through the city of Jericho. Jesus' baptism took place near the city of Jericho, and his wilderness experience probably took place in a mountainous area just west of the city. Jesus healed blind Bartimaeus in Jericho, and it is here that he has his encounter with Zacchaeus.

As the chief tax collector for the Romans, Zacchaeus has a certain degree of social status. He is well known in the Jericho area. The crowd that comes to see Jesus is probably amused by Zacchaeus' antics, for it would have been demeaning for a first-century adult Jew to run in public, let alone climb a tree.

The people of Jesus' day were required to pay several taxes. They had to pay three religious taxes: the tithe, the temple tax, and the "alms for the poor" tax. In addition to these taxes, there were four civil taxes: the poll tax, the sales tax, the income tax, and the frontier tax. The tax burden on the Jewish people was heavy, and it was Zacchaeus' job to collect the four civil taxes.

Tax collectors were so despised in Jewish society that anyone who ate with a tax collector was forbidden to give testimony in court for the rest of his/her life. The social penalty for sharing a meal with a tax collector was worse than if one had dinner with a leper.

It was totally out of character for Zacchaeus to scramble up a tree, but he does. He does something foolish. As Jesus walks by, he looks up at Zacchaeus and says, "Guess who's coming to dinner?" The crowd is shocked! When Jesus defiles himself by eating with a tax collector, he risks losing the crowd's sympathy. From the standpoint of their collective moral code, they can no longer identify with Jesus. He is no longer "one of them."

Why is Zacchaeus so determined to see Jesus? Zacchaeus has wealth and status. As a Jew, he has a religious tradition though, because of his vocation, he probably does not enjoy the fellowship of a community of faith. He is part of a community, but it is a community that doesn't accept him. However, Zacchaeus knows that he is missing something. Whatever he is missing in his life, it isn't money or power.

Zacchaeus probably doesn't know what he is missing, what he has lost or perhaps never had, but at least he knows he is missing something, and he goes in search of it. He also suspects that he might be able to find what he is missing in his relationship with Jesus. And it is true! In short (pun intended), we could say that Zacchaeus is missing the spiritual center of his life.

When we are missing or are cut off from the spiritual center of our life, it is not uncommon to have symptoms. We might suffer from depression, anxiety, or experience *anomie*,

a certain deadness of the soul. We might try to fill our emptiness, to tranquilize our inner pain through the accumulation of material possessions or by ingesting or injecting or smoking some substance. We don't know what kind of unease led Zacchaeus to embark upon his search, but we suspect he was hurting in some way.

Zacchaeus is curious enough about Jesus to want to see him. Not much was known about Jesus at that time. There were rumors to be sure: rumors of profound teachings and miraculous healings. Zacchaeus wants to catch a glimpse of this man about whom he has heard so much.

Curiosity is a perfectly acceptable reason to begin a spiritual search. After all, people come to church for many different reasons. Some have found their way to our church simply because they were invited by a friend. Some are undoubtedly drawn by the clever sermon titles posted on our church sign or by our web site. One couple recently told us, "I have been driving by this church for years and finally had to stop and see what you are like." Could a little church like this be doing anything significant, anything special? Is it a place where I feel comfortable, where the people are friendly? What is the worship service like? Is the sermon thought provoking? Do they have a good coffee hour? (These are, of course, all rhetorical questions.)

Curiosity may bring someone through our doors, but if we don't have something substantial to offer, they won't stay. People want to be part of a community. They want to be part of a congregation that is growing spiritually. They want to be part of a congregation that is involved in mission outreach. They want to develop inner resources for living life fully. They want to find answers or at least guidance in finding their own answers to the fundamental recurrent problems of human existence.

If they come to this church, they will soon discover that we do not have neatly packaged answers. At least I do not have neatly packaged answers. In fact, I have more questions than answers! One of my favorite quotes is from the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who said:

*Be patient with all that is unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves. Do not search for the answers, which could not be given to you now because you would not be able to live them. Live the questions now. Perhaps someday far in the future you will gradually, without even knowing it, live your way into the answers.*

Zacchaeus reaches out to Jesus. He has questions for which he is seeking an answer. Perhaps he is dimly aware that something is missing in his life, something important, something of tremendous value like the "pearl of great price" or the "treasure hidden in the field."

When Zacchaeus makes the effort to put himself in the presence of Jesus, Jesus responds. He risks losing the approbation of the crowd by coming to this sinner's house, by eating with

him. What Jesus says to Zacchaeus at dinner is not recorded. In some way, however, he touches Zacchaeus. He blesses him by his presence. In response, Zacchaeus vows to give half of his possessions to the poor. Jesus says, “Today salvation has come to this house.”

Why are you here today—or why are you reading this sermon on-line? I suspect that you are searching for something that is missing in your life. It is also possible that you have already found it and need to nurture it, to help it unfold and fill your life like yeast fills a loaf of bread. Even if you don’t know exactly what it is, like Zacchaeus, you have a sense of where you need to search to find it. I also suspect that what you are seeking is not a thing; it is a person. It is a relationship.

We, like Zacchaeus, come seeking a glimpse of divinity. Perhaps this is all we get in our moments of worship. Perhaps for one small moment during this worship service we will experience the presence of Jesus. It may be as we are touched by the words of a hymn. It may be during a moment of prayer. It may come through listening to and reflecting on the words of scripture. We may receive only a glimpse, but we may receive more than a glimpse. Jesus is here both within and among us! He is present to us in these moments of worship!

Like Zacchaeus, we come here this morning hoping to catch a glimpse of Jesus. As we do, we realize he is already reaching out to us, that he is asking us to invite him into our house. He wants us to be conscious of his presence not only in church but also at home. He asks us, like Zacchaeus, to invite him into our life. When we open our heart to him, we discover that he is with us not only in moments of formal worship but in every moment of our daily life.

Whether we know it or not, we are all seeking something. We are seeking what Jesus described as the pearl of great price, the treasure hidden in the field, the kingdom of God within us. We are seeking God, but we take comfort in knowing that God is also seeking us. God is longing to restore or deepen the neglected relationship between God and us, and between us and our soul. God reaches out to us, asking us to invite the Holy Spirit into our worship, into our house, into our daily life.

When we respond, when we invite God into our “house,” like Zacchaeus, we may hear that still, small voice saying, “Today salvation has come to this house.”

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June 27, 2021*