

THE HEALING POWER OF COMMUNITY

(07/11/2021)

Scripture Lessons: Luke 19:1-10
Luke 5:27-32

“He [Zacchaeus] was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature.” (Luke 19:3)

Two weeks ago, the first Sunday of our relaunching as the gathered church, as I read the scripture lesson for the day, the account of Jesus’ encounter with Zacchaeus as recorded in the Gospel According to Luke, one word jumped out at me.

I know the story of Zacchaeus. I happen to like it. I like how Jesus claims his own authority in initiating a relationship with Zacchaeus. Jesus is undoubtedly aware that “the crowd” views Zacchaeus as a pariah. As a tax collector, a minion of the Roman occupying force that is not disinclined to bleed the people of Israel dry through the excessive taxes they imposed, Zacchaeus is, not without cause, despised by his fellow Israelites. No one, no one would even think of sharing a meal with him. They would rather break bread with a leper.

In addition to collecting the onerous taxes, the three civil taxes, it appears that Zacchaeus had a more than marginal propensity to put his thumb on the scale, to collect a little more than was required. It also appears that the excess somehow found its way into Zacchaeus’s pocket. How else could we understand what he said to Jesus following their sharing of a meal: “And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.”

“If” I have defrauded anyone? The statement sounds hypothetical, but we suspect that it was not hypothetical. We suspect that Zacchaeus knew very well that he was skimming, that he was cheating his fellow Israelites, and that they had more than enough reason to despise him. We suspect that Jesus, who knew people in their depth, knew this as well. This is why Jesus smiled quietly when Zacchaeus began the verbalization of his commitment to making amends with the preposition “if.”

I know that Luke doesn’t explicitly say that Jesus “smiled quietly” when Zacchaeus said that “if” he had cheated anyone he would pay that person back four times as much—at least not in those exact words. However, I am convinced that Jesus did. However, that’s not the point.

As I mentioned, I have read the story of Zacchaeus many times. Two weeks ago, I knew what I wanted to say about this encounter. I wanted us to think about what the story tells us about Jesus, what it shows us about Zacchaeus, why Luke chose to include it in the gospel he was compiling, and what I believe to be the meaning and message of the vignette for us. I still believe the story is about searching for something that is missing in our life. It is about the spiritual journey and how, as Christians, our spiritual journey is hopefully nourished, strengthened, and guided by Jesus. Since it was the first Sunday that we were able to gather in this sanctuary for worship, I also wanted to make the point that our spiritual journey can be nourished, strengthened, and guided by the church.

However, the word that jumped out at me two weeks ago was the word “short.” Luke says that Zacchaeus was short. As I continued reading the lesson, I couldn’t help thinking that I couldn’t remember any other time in the Bible when a person’s height is mentioned. I recalled the account of David’s confrontation with Goliath, but Goliath was described as a giant, not as someone who was tall. I wondered why the matter of Zacchaeus’s height was such a big deal.

How short was Zacchaeus? He might have been just a little shorter than the average man of his time. However, he may have been very short—like what we used to call a midget, what we now call a “little person.” If he was, in truth, very short, how would he have been treated by the other kids at school, by his peers when he became an adult? How would he have been treated by the people in his synagogue? Would he have been accepted? Or would he have been shunned as different? Would he have had a sense of community in his life? Or would he have had the feeling that, although he belonged, he didn’t really belong?

I suspect that some of us know this; I suspect that many of us know this; I suspect that most of us know from personal experience that it isn’t easy when either other people place you in the category of “different,” or when you place yourself in this category. Or both. It isn’t easy when you don’t fit in. As Kermit the Frog said, “It isn’t easy being green.” And there are many, many ways that we can be green, that we can feel different, strange, not like other people, not what people expect us to be or want us to be.

We cling to the illusion that we are a melting pot, an inclusive society. However, if we were to ask someone who, for one reason or another, identifies as a member of a minority group, we will realize that we are not as inclusive as we think we are or that we would like to be. Or that at least *some* of us would like our society to be. This is not only true of our society; it is also true of us as individuals. We seem to have a lot of difficulty accepting anything or anyone we experience as different.

If, as we assume, Zacchaeus was so short that it deserved mention in scripture, how might the way he was perceived by others, the way he was treated by others have affected him? Because we draw our self-image and our self-esteem from the way people perceive us and relate to us, we can assume that Zacchaeus would have experienced feelings of inadequacy, feelings of inferiority, low self-esteem. He might have harbored a smoldering anger at those who looked down on him. He might have harbored a resentment against God for having “cursed” him with this congenital affliction. “God, why did you make me this way? Do you not love me? I just want to be like everyone else, to be the son that my parents wanted. But you have made this impossible.”

I can imagine Zacchaeus experiencing, suffering from these feelings. I can also imagine him compensating for feelings of inferiority by desiring power. Alfred Adler, who wrote about the dynamics of the inferiority complex and the consequent desire or drive for power in those who feel inferior or inadequate, can help us understand Zacchaeus—and anyone like him, including ourselves.

I still believe that the primary message from the account of Zacchaeus’ efforts to see Jesus, perhaps even to meet him, is about taking the initiative to search for what is missing in our

life. But bear with me; let me run with this subplot for a minute. Might it not have happened that Zacchaeus compensated for his feelings of inadequacy, his feelings of inferiority, by cozying up to the Roman occupying forces? In his search for the power that he was denied by his people, he may have identified with Rome, the empire. He may have even offered to serve as their tax collector. Now he can put the screws to those who have screwed him. Zacchaeus may have had a Napoleon complex, although he probably wouldn't have described it in those terms.

Zacchaeus may have felt that if he couldn't fit in with his peers, with his people, he would rise above them. He did this through his accumulation of wealth. But is this really what he wanted? Is this really what he needed? I think not! I think what he really wanted and needed was much deeper than this.

I believe that Zacchaeus was not only searching for a spiritual center of his life, as I mentioned in my previous sermon. He was also searching for community. He was searching for a place where he would be welcomed, where he would be accepted, where he would fit in, where he would be validated, where he would be valued as the unique individual he is.

Zacchaeus was unable to find this with his people. But he did find it with Jesus and the other disciples. This was the community that he unconsciously sought, and it was through this community that he was healed and made whole. By the way, this is what it means to be saved: to be healed and made whole. After dinner, and after Zacchaeus's declaration of faith, Jesus says, "Today salvation has come to this house."

We often think of Jesus as a loner, as an itinerant preacher, or at least I do. We forget that the very first thing he did after he emerged from the wilderness following his baptism, was to begin to form a community. He invited some fishermen to join him, some common laborers, and a political zealot. There is evidence that he invited at least one woman, Mary Magdalene, to accompany him. As we heard this morning, he even invited a tax collector to be one of the twelve who were to carry on his message after his death. It was a strange community, to be sure. But there is one thing we can say with some certainty about this community--it was inclusive.

We have had a tough time the past sixteen months. We have all experienced a sense of detachment and isolation that has not be healthy and life-giving for us. We have experienced a separation from our extended family, our friends, our colleagues at work, and our neighbors. We have experienced a sense of isolation or separation from our church, our community of faith. We felt this most poignantly when we could not gather as a community to mourn the loss of Don Jolie, Bud Hubley, Gil Joe, Rae Kay, Ursula Guenon, and Pat Grogan, when we could not draw from the ancient rituals that provide us with both meaning and comfort, when we could not draw from the empathy, the caring, the love that we have in this church for one another.

This sense of isolation really hurt. I just want to remind us that many people feel this sense of isolation as a sort of an existential feeling or awareness. For them, it is not circumstantial, as it was for most of us during the pandemic; it is a permanent state of being. I am thinking of Black, Latino, Native American and Asian members of our society who receive the message that they don't really belong. I am thinking of the LGBTQ community, still struggling not only for acceptance, but for their constitutional rights, the right to be who they

authentically are. I am thinking of people who struggle not to see themselves as disabled or deficient. It is difficult to come to a deep inner sense of validation, of joy in being who we authentically are, if, like Zacchaeus, we do not receive this message from our society.

Through our individual and systemic prejudice and discrimination, we have not only deprived members of these groups of their constitutional rights; we have taught them to judge, condemn, hate, and perhaps even loathe themselves. When a member of a minority group wants to assimilate into the mainstream society, to be like everyone else, he/she unconsciously adopts the values, including the prejudices of the mainstream society. This means that through the process of their assimilation, they learn to look down on their own kind; they learn to look down on themselves. This makes it difficult for them to see themselves as Jesus sees them, as God sees them. They suffer a spiritual wound.

What I find particularly sad, particularly troubling, is the realization that the church has not always served as the inclusive community of faith that can provide us with this sense of healing and wholeness. Far too often, as witnessed in the recent discovery of hundreds of mass graves in Canada, the mass graves of indigenous children who were forcibly separated from their parents, submitted to Christian indoctrination, and were brutally abused or killed by the staff of the Roman Catholic orphanages where they had been sent, the church has initiated or conspired with those dark forces that would commit genocide in many different forms.

I think this is the subplot of the story of Zacchaeus. I think Zacchaeus, who was looked down on by his people because of a congenital abnormality, compensated by a search for wealth, for power, when what he really wanted, what he really needed was community. This is what he found with Jesus and the disciples—a place where he, a sinner, belonged. And this is what we as a church strive to offer to anyone and everyone who comes through those doors—a sense of how much they are accepted, valued, and loved not only by us but by God.

Every time we do this, I can hear Jesus say, “Today salvation has come to this house.”

A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson

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