

THE HEALING POWER OF COMMUNITY

(02/25/2024)

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

“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)

This morning, following our worship service, we will gather downstairs in the vestry for a soup and sandwich luncheon hosted by our Women’s Fellowship. Following the luncheon, Lou Dundin, our Moderator, will gavel us to order (no small task for this particular church!) as we hold our annual meeting.

The polity of our church, which stands in the Free Church Tradition, is a democracy. The power lies not with the ordained clergy, but with the laity. Every official member of this church votes on matters that come before us at our gathering. As a member of this church, I also get one vote. This means that if I want to lead our church in a certain direction, the direction I believe we should be heading, I have to do this through teaching, argument, and persuasion. I have no other power. And that’s the way I like it! That’s why I chose to be ordained in the United Church of Christ.

How many times have the members of this church gathered in our sanctuary or vestry for an annual meeting? We have met as the gathered church on this very spot for the past 159 years—through good times and bad, through times of plenty and times of want. Allowing for several years that the church probably did not meet because of war or did not meet during the pandemic we recently experienced, we have held an annual meeting at least 150 times!

At our meeting, we will look back over the year we have just lived. In our Annual Report for 2023, each of the boards and committees has submitted a summary of its work this past year and has articulated its hopes for the future. From these reports and from the extensive list of thank-you’s that begin our annual report, a newcomer would have a good sense of who we are and what is important to us here in this little church!

This, as you know, is the Second Sunday in Lent. Last week I promised to begin a Lenten sermon series on the power of prayer. However, for just one more week, let’s reflect on the theme of healing. There were several threads that I mentioned in passing last Sunday that I would like to pursue a little further.

Last week we thought about solitude, a theme to which we will be returning during our reflections on prayer, and the importance of touch, of breaking down or setting aside, or reaching past the boundaries that separate us from each other. This morning, let’s build on what we began last week by reflecting on in community, on our community, and on the healing power of

community, because this is an important, an essential part of what we are, of who we are as a church.

The scripture lesson that came to mind when I thought about this theme was the story of Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus as recorded in the Gospel According to Luke. In this encounter, Jesus, not surprisingly, takes a counter-cultural stand; he 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 bleeding the people of Israel dry through the taxes they impose, Zacchaeus is, not without cause, despised by his fellow Israelites. No one would even think of sharing a meal with him! They would rather break bread with a leper!

In addition to collecting 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 seems that the excess 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 qualified his confession by beginning it 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! But that's not the point.

I have read the story of Zacchaeus many times. As I read it this past week, I knew what I wanted to say about this encounter. The story tells us something about Jesus; it tells us something about Zacchaeus; and it tells us something about ourselves. There was a reason why Luke chose to include it in the gospel he was compiling.

I believe the story is about searching for something that is missing in our life. Zacchaeus knows that something is missing in his life. He has no idea what it is, but he is convinced that the answer to his question, the goal of his search lies in Jesus. He turns to Jesus to find that which is missing in his life. Like Jairus who begged Jesus to heal his daughter, and the woman who believed that if she but touched the hem of Jesus' robe she would be healed, Zacchaeus is not to be dissuaded. Like the blind beggars who shouted out to Jesus to have mercy on them, Zacchaeus takes the initiative in the encounter. When he can't force his way through the crowd

to get a glimpse of this great man, he climbs a tree. It is here that Jesus sees him. Jesus tells him to come down from the tree for Jesus will eat at his house that very evening.

This vignette is about the spiritual journey and how, as Christians, our spiritual journey is nourished, strengthened, and guided by Jesus. Today, as we think back over what happened in and through us in the context of our church this past year, we realize that our individual spiritual journey can be nourished, strengthened, and guided by the church.

This past week, however, the word that jumped out at me as I reread this vignette was the word “short.” Luke says that Zacchaeus was short in stature. It struck me 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, but if this were so, why would Luke have made a point of mentioning his height? 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 or 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 many of us know from personal experience that it isn’t easy when 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, sometimes including our parents.

We cling to the illusion that America is 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.

By the way, let me clarify what I mean by a minority group. The way I understand it, a minority group is a group of people who are identifiable in some way and who are the object of discrimination or prejudice. It is not a matter of numbers, of statistics. Blacks outnumbered whites 20-1 in South Africa under apartheid, but as an identifiable group, Blacks were not

allowed access to education, political office, certain careers, health care, and were not allowed to live in certain areas. This made them a minority group. Although there are more women than men here in America, the way I understand it, women qualify as members of a minority group. And it is certainly true of women in Afghanistan.

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. He would have suffered from 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 these feelings, suffering from these feelings. I can also imagine him compensating for his 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 members of minority groups in this country.

I still believe that the primary lesson that we should take from the account of Zacchaeus’ efforts to meet Jesus is about the importance of 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. 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. As we learned last week, the Greek word *sozo*, which means to be saved, also means to be healed and to be 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. I think of Jesus as an introvert, a trait we share in common. I sometimes forget that the very first thing he did after he emerged from the wilderness following his baptism was 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 entrusted with carrying 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 four years. We have experienced a sense of detachment and isolation that has not been 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 several members of our church family, 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 during the pandemic 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 those who suffer from antisemitism or Islamophobia. 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.

Today, on the date of our annual meeting, a time when we celebrate who we are as a church, a time when we celebrate our mission outreach to those in need, we need to remember that the matter of Christian community is at the very heart of who we are as a church. We are open, affirming, and welcoming. We invite anyone who desires to share with us in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. In this church, everybody is somebody! No matter who you are, you are somebody special to us!

This is what we as a church offer to anyone and everyone who comes through these doors. We want you to know how much you are accepted, valued, and loved as a child of God. How can we convince you of the gospel that Jesus shared with us, the good news that God loves each and every one of us as we are, if we fail to welcome you into our church family, if we fail to offer you the healing that can come in and through community?

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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