

“Heart Transplant”
Luke 19:1-10
Collegiate Presbyterian Church
October 31, 2010

He entered Jericho and was passing through it.
A man was there named Zacchaeus;
he was a chief tax collector and was rich.
He was trying to see who Jesus was,
but on account of the crowd he could not,
because he was short in stature.
So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him,
because he was going to pass that way.

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."
So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.
All who saw it began to grumble and said,
"He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner."

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."

Then Jesus said to him,
"Today salvation has come to this house,
because he too is a son of Abraham.
For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Sermon

Many years ago I was asked to perform a wedding
for the daughter of a couple in the church.
The wedding was several months off,
but since I had only met the “bride-to-be” once
and had never met the “groom-to-be,”
I invited them for a little get acquainted time.
A few days before that meeting, I got a call from the bride’s mother.
She was an elder in the church
and just wanted to clue me in on a few things.
Although she didn’t want to unduly influence
my first impression of her future son-in-law,
she DID want to share some of her concerns...
just to warn me, from her perspective, about a few possible issues.
Yet, for all her explaining... all those caveats...

the message was crystal clear:
I wasn't supposed to like him.

We all have people we're not supposed to like, don't we?
Tea Party activists or tax-and-spend liberals.
Drill, baby, drillers or tree-hugging, granola-heads.
Sarah Palin or Nancy Pelosi.
Fred Phelps or the Iowa Supreme Court justices.
From wherever it is that we sit, these folks are
so out of touch...
so extreme...
so unreasonable...
so wrong...
that we are know we are not supposed to like them.

Well, for those Palestinian Jews squirming
under Rome's imperial heel,
Zacchaeus was at the top of the "Ten Most Disliked" list.
As a tax collector,
he was genuine player in the tolltaker mafia.
As a CHIEF tax collector,
he had almost godfather status.
And finally, no surprise here, he was rich...
very, very rich.

Though by now Luke has told us
that we know Jesus accepts tax collectors,
clearly, Zacchaeus pushes the envelope.
Think Kenneth Lay scampering up a street lamp.
Picture Bernie Madoff shinnying up a telephone pole.
Among scumbags, Zacchaeus is in a whole different category,
which is, by the way, the untold story behind
one of our all-time favorite Sunday School songs.
*Zacchaeus was a wee little man
and a wee little man was he.
He climbed up in a sycamore tree
for the Lord he wanted to see..."*

What we weren't told...
what we didn't know then is that he is a
filthy-rich, traitorous parasite
who was REALLY, REALLY easy to dislike.

The thing is Luke won't let us do that.
In fact, it almost seems he wants us TO like him.
It's confusing, I know...
at first, we're NOT supposed to like him

because he's rich...
and Jesus has said that the rich are heartless fools
who not only will be sent away empty,
but who are about as likely to get into heaven
as a camel is to squeeze through the eye of a needle.

Yet, as despicable as Zacchaeus is to that crowd,
Luke won't let us demonize him.

Instead, he personally introduces us to him,
telling us his name, Zacchaeus -
which ironically means "pure,"
"innocent,"
"righteous one."

He tells us Zacchaeus comes up a good bit short,
both in his stature and in character.

Yet, perhaps most important,
Luke shows us
that in addition to what everybody else sees in him,
Jesus sees something else –
a son of Abraham...
a child of the covenant...
a man called "pure" and "innocent" and "righteous"
who just might live into his name.

Not that Zacchaeus understands all this...
all he knows is that on this particular day
something compels him to jump up from his desk...
to lock the office door...
clamber up a sycamore tree just to SEE this holy man.

Shedding all semblance of dignity and decorum,
Zacchaeus guesses which way Jesus is heading
and races ahead to get a good look.

But because he is so "vertically challenged"...
because of his severe height disadvantage
he has to climb the nearest tree.

It was quite an effort, to tell the truth –
an early slip takes the skin off his shin...
a bent branch slaps him in the face...
sap is sticking to his hands and sandals.

But he makes it...
and he's in time...
and before he knows it
Jesus is looking up through the leaves AT HIM.
And as the Savior passed that way
He looked up in that tree
And He said, "Zacchaeus, you come down!"

*For I'm going to your house today
For I'm going to your house to stay"*

Well, here's where I think the children's song gets it right,
because, to me, Jesus seems almost playful with Zacchaeus.
I imagine him standing under the tree,
peering up through the branches,
"yoohooing" to Zacchaeus...
almost like a child saying to her friend:
"Come on, let's go over to your house and play."

Well, Zacchaeus practically falls out of the tree,
he's so STARTLED by Jesus.
And he's so HAPPY to welcome Jesus into his home
that his heart nearly jumps out of his chest.
And as the crowd
joins in that grumble that is becoming all too familiar,
off they go, side by side...
the crook and the Christ...
the lost sheep and the shepherd...
the lost coin and the searching woman...
the lost son and the forgiving father...
off they go, the shrimp and the Savior,
walking to a feast of grace and justice.
GRACE because even though it's Zacchaeus' house,
Jesus did the inviting.
GRACE... because even though it is Zacchaeus' food,
it is Jesus that makes this meal even possible.
GRACE... because if Jesus hadn't noticed him...
if the Lord hadn't called his name, Zacchaeus
would have just gone back to his office that afternoon
his rich,
cheating,
despised,
and miserable self.
Yes, the feast that Zacchaeus partakes in is a feast of grace...
grace of the most amazing order...
but it is also a feast of justice, isn't it?
Because somewhere along that dusty road
from Jericho to Zacchaeus' house...
somewhere on the way from that sycamore tree to the feast,
something begins to well up inside this little man
and before he knows it
justice is rolling out of him like waters
and righteousness like an everflowing stream.

In my imagination it happens
just as they approach Zacchaeus' compound...
with its big house and its many outbuildings...
with servants scurrying around doing this and that.
He calls for his wife and kids:
"Come, come, say hello to our honored guest!"
And when everyone is gathered...
when all the signs of his wealth and success are in view,
Zacchaeus stops...
and thinks about what he had to do to get all this.
He thinks about what he has to do to keep all this.
And then, as if someone flipped a switch,
Slowly, but ever so surely, he begins to smile.
"Look," he says to Jesus, "look at all I have.
I will give half of all this to the poor.
And if I have cheated anyone of anything,
I will pay them back four times over."
It is a "giving away" that far exceeds the standard of a tithe...
this is reparation way beyond any requirement of the law... Jesus seeks out this one
who was seeking him...
and once he is found,
Zacchaeus is a profoundly changed man.
"I will give," he says... "I will pay..."
And because he gives... because he pays back...
the grace of Jesus that flows into Zacchaeus
now flows out of him to bless others -
one changed life touching another and another... and another.

Well, they may not have known it exactly,
the folks who were there,
but they were witnessing
one of world's the earliest recorded heart transplants.
No one cracked Zacchaeus' chest...
there was no heart-lung machine...
no one rushed in at the last minute
with a mini-cooler filled with dry ice...
yet, right before their eyes the Great Physician was taking
his heart of stone...
his heart of selfishness...
his heart of betrayal...
and exchanging it for a heart gushing
with extravagant generosity and justice.
With God all things ARE possible...
and all that is left now
is for Jesus to officially proclaim the miracle:
"Today salvation has come to this house!"

The question that remains...
at least the question that remains FOR ME is:
“Does this happen still?” Does this still happen?

I have a younger sister,
her name is Susan,
and she is a recovering alcoholic.
Susan is a creative person.
I’ve often wondered if she might have written poetry
if her life had taken a different path.

In some ways Susan is the picture of Martha...
always busy doing something...
loving a neat and tidy home.

In other ways, she is the very picture of Mary...
knowing well the “better part” of sitting at Jesus’ feet.

My sister is a consummate caregiver...
caring for her children
(and now to her delight, her first grandchild)
caring for an elderly woman in her home,
caring for our aging mother as she grows more frail.

And the thing is that knowing her now,
I have to remind myself that Susan was drunk
for the better part of forty years...

Now, I don’t want to over-dramatize Susan’s healing because
she grew up in the Southern Baptist Church...
she went to church at least three times a week...
Susan knew about Jesus.

But somewhere along the way there was a miracle.
It happened about 10 years ago -
she was seeking salvation...
Jesus was seeking her...
and when they met face-to-face
(how else can I say this?)
“Salvation came to her house.”

So, YES! It does still happen...
Jesus still sees the things about us that others don’t see...
Jesus still welcomes those who seek him...
Jesus still finds those who are lost...
because to him no son of Abraham...
no daughter of Sarah...
no child of God is ever too bad,
too unlikeable,
too far gone,
too sick to have a heart transplant.

Thanks be to God!