

Isaiah 1:10-18

Psalm 32:1-8

2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12

Luke 19:1-10

Most of us, I expect, have been in large crowds in public places at some time during our lives...perhaps many times. It might have been a parade or maybe in was a sporting event or perhaps it was a concert or it might even have been a political rally. Gatherings in public places are usually around some sort of significant event and we show up because we want to be a part of what's happening and we want to see what's going on.....first hand. We want the whole experience. And most of us have probably experienced having trouble seeing for the throngs of people in front of us or the ones who stand up at just a crucial moment and block our view or lean over into 'our' space so we can't see what's happening. It's a universal phenomenon and it seems to be universally annoying.

In our gospel lesson this morning, Luke takes us into just this sort of situation in his telling about the encounter between Jesus and a little fellow names Zacchaeus. Luke tells us quite a bit about Zacchaeus in addition to the fact the he's physically short. We know that he is a tax collector.....and not just A tax collector, but the *chief* tax collector in the town of Jericho. He has other tax collectors reporting to him. Now the position of tax collector was not one that was held in high esteem by anyone in the community. These folks were seen as traitors and collaborators because they were collecting taxes that were turned over to the Roman occupiers. Not only that, but they earned their own living by extracting additional money from their neighbors for themselves. No doubt Zacchaeus was taking a cut from all the tax collectors that worked for him in addition to the cut that he took for himself when he collected taxes. It would be safe to say, that this man Zacchaeus, while a Jew, was probably despised and socially ostracized by everyone in town.....from the Pharisees to the poorest vagrant. And he probably lived in the biggest and fanciest house as well. The storyteller, Luke, describes him as a rich man and Luke has a lot to say about the fate of rich people. He's the one who tells us the story of the rich prince who wanted to follow Jesus and was told to sell all he had and give it to the poor and then follow Jesus. The rich prince went away sad because he wasn't willing to do that. And Luke is also the one who pronounces that it's easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get into heaven. Luke's point is that it's very hard to be rich and also follow Jesus, but he also tells us that all things are possible to the God who loves us. So perhaps this is a story about possibilities in impossible situations. There are certainly no redeeming qualities in Zacchaeus that Luke shares with us.

As the story opens, Jesus is travelling through Jericho on his way to Jerusalem. At every stop, he is getting closer to his eventual end and he is teaching and preaching and healing all along the way. Interesting, that this despised little tax collector, Zacchaeus, is desperate to see Jesus. He is so desperate that when the crowd blocks his view he runs on ahead so that he can find a good perch far above the crowd and can see Jesus coming. He scrambles up into a sycamore tree and watches anxiously for Jesus. What we don't know is *why* Zacchaeus wants so badly to see Jesus. Why is he so determined to get a good look at Jesus? Has he heard about him? Is he hoping for some kind of miracle from Jesus? That seems unlikely since he has his health, a fine house and plenty of money. What does he need for Jesus to do for him? Perhaps he doesn't even know himself.....he just knows that he *has* to see Jesus!

And see him he does.....from his secure perch in the sycamore tree. As Jesus approaches, he sees Zacchaeus up in the tree, calls his name and tells him to come down. How does Jesus know his name? It would seem that the encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus is now pretty deliberate and intentional. Jesus doesn't seem to have picked out a stranger. Jesus seems to have spoken to someone that he already knows. Zacchaeus sees Jesus.....and the remarkable thing is that Jesus sees Zacchaeus as well. When he comes down from the tree, Jesus invites himself to Zacchaeus' house for the evening. Breaking bread with someone....to be the guest of someone..... is such a profound gesture of acceptance that it startles everyone in the crowd. What is Jesus doing? This man that he's befriending is a reprobate. He's the scum of the earth. He's hated by everyone here. He's a cheat. He's the antithesis of one who loves his neighbor. The people in the crowd are complaining.....loudly!

Just imagine for a moment that you are in that crowd. Just imagine for a moment that you are walking down the street with lots of others following Jesus' every move. And now think of the biggest cheat you know. Think of the one person that you believe to be beyond redemption. We all have someone in our lives.....or someone that we know about.....that we actually react to so strongly that we would turn away from anyone who turned *toward* them. Well.....that's Zacchaeus. And now all the followers who are with Jesus have to figure out what to do because Jesus has just singled out Zacchaeus for some special attention.....and undeserved attention to be sure! It's not hard to imagine what people are thinking and feeling. It's not hard to imagine what *we* would be thinking and feeling. It's not fair. And surely Zacchaeus is unworthy of special attention from Jesus.

Now here comes the interesting part. In the translation that we heard this morning, the one from the NRSV, it says that Zacchaeus says, "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." And Jesus replies, "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." Certainly we could all agree that Zacchaeus is among the lost, so that's all well and good. It sounds like a very clean conversion story.

Zacchaeus offers to change his ways and Jesus responds by announcing that salvation has come to his household. Zacchaeus promises to repent and Jesus promises salvation.

But there's another translation of this exchange. In the King James version Zacchaeus says, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold." The present tense would imply that Zacchaeus has already amended his life and that perhaps Jesus has singled him out because he knows that and wants to reassure Zacchaeus and all those watching, that salvation has come to him because he has already changed his ways and because he too is still a son of Abraham.

So here's the question for us to ponder: Does our repentance.....our change in direction.....come from within and then we are forgiven for our misdeeds and are offered salvation? Or is our repentance a joyful response to the salvation offered by Jesus when we are still in a state in which we don't deserve it? Do we change how we do business out of sheer gratitude to God? Or do we change how we do business in order to be worthy of salvation?

If anyone in your life has ever forgiven you for something that you considered unforgivable....and never mentioned it again, but restored you to a right relationship with them.....reconciled you to them completely, then you already know what it feels like to have the burden of guilt lifted from you. You already know the boundless joy of being restored to them when you didn't deserve it. That's the gift that God offers us through Jesus Christ. We can know that in our heads, but if we don't let it travel to our hearts, the joy that is a natural response to such restoration simply doesn't come. We have to take that knowledge in. And we have to embrace it without our intellect getting in the way.

It prompts a huge sigh of relief. It feels as if the weight of the world had been lifted off our shoulders. It is as if the burden of our own failings were simply removed from us. And our hearts are light and our joy is indescribable and we simply cannot do enough for the people around us. It's a joy too hard to contain. We inevitably have to share it. Because God has been gentle and forgiving and merciful with us, we are able.....without even thinking about it.....to be gentle and forgiving and merciful with ourselves and subsequently with other people.

It's the relationship that God is looking for.....not the good behavior, although God seems to be very pleased when we behave ourselves. This story is about Zacchaeus *seeing* Jesus.....and wanting to see him desperately enough to climb a tree.....and it's about Jesus *seeing* Zacchaeus right back and enfolding him like the long lost son he wants back.....no matter what. This intentional *seeing* on the part of both of them is a mutual confirmation and validation of their identity and their very existence. What we need to know from this story is that anyone who desperately wants to see Jesus.....will. And Jesus seeing them in response is the most powerful validation that anyone could ever get.....to be truly seen!!! It's why God sent Jesus to us while we were still in sin. He didn't wait for us to figure it out and be good. He came when we

were.....and are.....miserable sinners. When Jesus singled out Zacchaeus, maybe he was singling out each one of us.....calling each one of us by name.....breaking bread with us in the most profound acceptance possible.....the bread and wine of his body and blood. Jesus couldn't possibly have given us any more than that. He gave us his all and reconciled us to the God who loves us.....even in our sin. When we realize that.....when we really take that it.....into our hearts, not just our heads.....when we live that every day, we are living the salvation that God has brought to our house.....just like Zacchaeus.....because we, too, are sons of Abraham.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.