**Surprising Reconciliation**

**Narrative Lectionary**

**Lent 5**

**April 2, 2017**

Luke 18:31-19:10 Russell Mitchell-Walker

Two weekends ago I was at a planning meeting for Skylight Festival of justice, spirituality and arts. These past few months we identified the need to work toward more diversity in our planning team, especially cultural diversity. We also identified the importance of making better connections and building relationship with the Six Nations reserve, the local indigenous community close to Paris Ontario, where the Festival is held. I offered to make contact with Bishop Mark Macdonald the Anglican Indigenous bishop and he put me in touch with Norm Casey of Six Nations. I had some e-mail communication and a few phone conversations with Norm and in our conversations everything being relational and the importance of personal contact was emphasized more than once. So given that, I suggested that we meet on the Six Nations reserve and with folk from their community for part of our planning meeting and then worked toward that. We only had a few people, come, but the invite was out there, and seeds were planted. The sharing we had was rich and meaningful.

In our gospel reading today, Jesus connects with Zaccheus and brings him back into the community. He builds relationship, not only with Zaccheus, but also between Zaccheus and the community who has shunned him. It is clear in the passage that the people gathered did not think much of Zaccheus as a tax collector, and indeed after Jesus invited himself to have dinner with him, the people grumbled saying: “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” Zaccheus being estranged from the community, was now welcoming Jesus into his home, putting his followers in a challenging situation – do they continue their prejudiced attitude and distance themselves from Jesus, or continue to follow and be open to having their perspective challenged? Eating with anyone was a sign of social acceptance. Jesus honoured Zaccheus and so encourages and challenges his followers to honour him too. This is a good learning and story for us. How often do our assumptions get challenged? How willing are we to have them challenged? We have learned much about our assumptions of First Nations people over the years and hopefully gained a deeper understanding of their realities and challenges which have contributed to the situations we often hear about and the stereotypes we have learned.

When we gathered at St. Lukes, a small Anglican church on the Six Nations reserve for our Skylight Planning, Norm welcomed us along with Michael Montour, a faithkeeper of the longhouse. Michael offered a traditional opening and welcome as well as a closing at the end of the evening. It is Mohawk tradition that their words are the first thing said and the last thing at any gathering and most of it is a thanksgiving. Norm shared with us the history of the Six Nations, that they came from upstate New York after the American Revolution. The Americans wanted them to fight for them against the British and the leaders refused, not wanting to get into any of the fight - upholding the two row wampum agreement that is described as:  “In one row is a ship with our White Brothers’ ways; in the other a canoe with our ways. Each will travel down the river of life side by side. Neither will attempt to steer the other’s vessel.” However some did decide to fight and they got pulled into the battle. Then the American leaders negotiated with the Six Nations leaders that if they supported them in the battle they would be given a significant amount of land. They agreed, but when the battle was over the American backed out of the agreement and exiled the Six Nations. They ended up in Ontario along the Grand River. When the Canadian treaties were signed, it included that the People of the Six Nations would have six miles on either side of the Grand River from its source to its mouth, an area of 3800km2. However much of this was later sold by the government and the reserve is now less than 190km2.

We learned that there was 6 Anglican churches in this area, one for each of the Iroquois Nations – Mohawk, Iroquois, Oneida, Onondaga, Seneca and Tuscarora. This seemed like a lot of churches for the area, and we couldn’t help but think that it was also a way of ensuring colonial control and keeping division among the Nations. They now all have ownership of the churches and none want to close or join with others, even though they are having trouble keeping some of them going. Sounds familiar to what we are experiencing in the church.

Learning this history helps us understand the realities and challenges for these our Festival neighbours and begins the journey of deepening our relationship with one another. We hope to have a few contributors from the community, and Michael will open and close the Festival.

Building relationship and reconciliation is a process. Zaccheus challenges the crowd, those who choose to join them for dinner, by pointing out the good works he already does. Some scholars believe that the Greek used in the statement of Zaccheus’ turnaround and generosity, is present tense not past. Thus he is saying that he gives half of his income to the poor and pays back four times what he owes to people he has defrauded. Salvation is a process – we can’t expect to be perfect overnight, if ever. David Ewart in his commentary on this passage says: “Salvation in this lifetime is not about the end state. Salvation is the process, the healing and reconciling that is needed for creating right relationships within which compromised, impure, and sinful people - like us - can live within, in response to, and toward, the realm of God.” Reconciliation takes time and work, and we live into it as we seek the shalom community of God. There can also be the question here of who is the salvation for, which Jesus proclaims has come? It is usually assumed that he is talking about Zaccheus, but maybe he is talking about the gathered community, who hear that the one who is despised, is actually the one who is faithful. Their previous assumptions and attitudes challenged and turned upside down. Salvation comes when we embrace and honour those who are excluded and despised.

As Jesus approaches Zaccheus in the tree, he looks up. New Testament scholar Anselm Grun identifies ‘looks up’ as the Greek word *anablepo* which most often means looking up to heaven or seeing disembodied ideas. Jesus looks up to a person and sees the face of God. Zaccheus sees the same in Jesus and is filled with Joy. Transformation and reconciliation happens when we can see the face of God in others - when we can be open to the blessing that others can be to us. When we can be open to experiencing people differently than previously assumed. May we be open to seeing the face of God in others, in working toward reconciliation to those estranged from us, or excluded by us. May we learn from one another, the blessing that God is in and with us. Amen.