

Thirty First Sunday in Ordinary Time, C

In The Tree Tops

3 November 2013

Pastor Samuel B. Adams

Luke 19:1-10

How many of you have ever claimed a special vantage point to watch a parade? When I was in high school I worked at the Safeway supermarket in my home town of Port Townsend, Washington. The annual Rhododendron Festival parade went right down the main street. During the parade those of us from the store would close down the business and lock the doors. Then we would climb a ladder up onto the canopy that shaded the sidewalk. From there we could look down and see everything. We watched bands, floats, horses, and all the rest, including the Shrine Circus clowns in their little “kiddy cars” doing donuts in the street.

Today the Common Lectionary features the fun story of how God changed a man named Zacchaeus. Jesus and his disciples came through his home town of Jericho bound for the long, hilly road up to Jerusalem. A fair crowd had gathered as he strolled through town with his traveling companions. It became very much like a short parade.

The streets were crowded that day for another reason, too. Many pilgrims were on the same road. The faithful from everywhere were going up to Jerusalem for the Passover, to celebrate as a people, the pivotal moment in their history when God sent Moses to lead them out of slavery in Egypt. This celebration was as important and as joyful for them as Easter is for us. It centered around the temple precincts at the heart of their premier city.

Jesus, the well known – some said notorious – rabbi from the north, had people talking. And there was certainly more than one opinion about him! Those who appreciated his ministry extolled the compassionate prophet who cared about common people and healed the sick. Some religious leaders worried out loud, muttering and complaining that he was stirring people up, confusing them, leading them away from careful observance of the faith of their ancestors.

Zacchaeus, a man of short stature, climbed a tree so he could see. He would have liked our parade perch in my home town, with its commanding, unobstructed view of the street. But he would never have been invited to join us. He was the sort of man that his neighbors loved to hate. As a chief tax collector, he was an official of the Roman government. He had cheated his countrymen often enough that they had little reason to trust him. Zacchaeus’ job performance labeled him as crafty, dishonest, without an ounce of compassion. Though he may have been no more corrupt than his colleagues.

Yet, on this day, he was singled out for special treatment. Jesus spotted him in his leafy perch, called him down, and invited himself to his home, and presumably to his table. His neighbors were appalled, muttering piously about Jesus going off to be the guest of such a notorious sinner. He seemed a most unlikely candidate for discipleship. But there must have been some internal ferment going on inside him that pushed him to extraordinary lengths to see and hear the prophet from the northern province of Galilee.

Becoming a follower of Jesus is life changing. It had been for two sets of fishermen brothers, Andrew and Simon – we call him Peter – and James and John. They had left their livelihood to follow him. And it was life changing for Zacchaeus. When he examined his past, he saw that his dishonest stewardship that made him wealthy had given him little else besides rejection, loneliness and isolation. And underlying guilt.

Jesus looked into the man's eyes and he saw something else. He saw in this wretched little man the capacity to become a steward who was as large of heart as he was small of body. A man who could use the wealth he had stolen to strengthen the lives of his poor neighbors. In contrast to everything his neighbors believed about this despised tax collector, he turned out to be a generous man. This once dishonest steward was transformed. Now his life sang of compassion and mercy.

“Half of my possessions I give to the poor.”

Did you catch that? Half. Fifty percent. Most of us consider ourselves very generous when we give much less of our substance. We thought a tithe of ten percent was a lot.

And, did you notice the way he spoke of making restitution for his admitted excesses?

“If I have defrauded anyone of anything, I pay back four times as much.”

To pay back the fraudulent gains, certainly. With a fair interest rate, of course. The holiness code in Leviticus demanded someone like him to repay the principle plus one fifth, or twenty per cent. But three hundred percent interest? That is an extravagance comparable only to the extravagance of God's amazing grace that heals broken souls. Like Zacchaeus.

On occasion I have joined a gathering of clergy on the Internet who share insights about the weekly lectionary passages. One discussion highlighted an element in the Zacchaeus story I had never noticed. According to Joseph Fitzmyer in the Anchor Bible, we may have missed an important point in this story. He suggests that Zacchaeus was neither a seeker trying to catch a glimpse of the famous teacher, nor a penitent responding to Jesus recognition. He was already well established on the path of commitment. The Greek verbs are *present tense*. It is not that he is going to do all this from now on. He already does it. ***“I give to the poor.... I pay back four times as much....”***

This simple story about a funny little man who climbed a tree so he could see, has turned out to be another one of those parables that Jesus, and Luke, loved so. It's a story that explodes comfortable assumptions about respectability and about religious faith. For the crowd in Jericho. For Luke's readers across the centuries. Even for us.

The story of Zacchaeus finds powerful echoes in the lives of disciples in every generation. Church history tells us of the stunning transformation of St. Francis, a wealthy young man who left behind his family and wealth to serve his poor neighbors. Last Sunday we celebrated the legacy of three others, the architects of the Protestant Reformation, and of the Church of Scotland, our own tradition. Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Knox. The twentieth century saw Martin Luther King in our country, Mother Theresa in India, and Archbishop Oscar Romero in El Salvador. There are countless others.

The same good news is at the heart of each of these lives. Grace. Transformation. They stand as examples of how God changes a person whom God chooses. God's compelling love took Zacchaeus, a hated tax collector, and formed a man whose deep compassion and commitment transformed his whole life. God's grace filled forgiveness made Luther the visionary prophet who changed his world, and shaped ours.

God's amazing work of transformation is happening around us, and in us. Now. Many of us have powerful stories to tell, though we are often too shy to share them. But there is a way we can quietly act out our gratitude as stewards of God's transforming love. Giving. Sharing. Probably not as dramatically as Zacchaeus, but with as much authentic joy.

It struck me that this "wee little man" has much to teach us as we consider our commitment to Central church as faithful stewards. His profession made him a steward of taxpayer's money and, underneath that, a steward of the relationship between his a conquered people and the ever present government of distant Rome. Cheating his neighbors and getting rich off their tax money was terrible stewardship of the power his position gave him.

The story of his stunning transformation reminds us that stewardship is about much more than money. It is about how God's Spirit transforms us, and makes us faithful disciples. In any congregation where that happens, the money will be there. The naked truth is that we put our money where our hearts lead us. So, today's sermon about stewardship is primarily about how God changes people, recreating them to be Jesus' faithful disciples for our time.

Most of you just received a letter from Ruling Elder John Helm with a brochure giving an overview of next year's budget. There was a pledge card inviting you to commit to support Central Church financially in 2014. I don't need to tell you how crucial that will be as a new pastor joins you, and your elected leaders, in partnership for ministry here. It's not just about money. It is about discipleship. A budget is nothing less than a blueprint for ministry.

Your leaders have worked hard this year to shape a blueprint for faithful ministry, and to find a pastor who can share that vision. Now, as you stand near the threshold of that ministry, the session invites you to prayerfully consider how you will support Central in 2014. Your commitment is crucial. I pray that you will be faithful. And generous. Together. Thanks be to God. Amen.