

Sermon - Transforming Welcome

Sunday, November 3, 2013

Scripture Lessons: Jeremiah 17:5-8, Luke 19:1-10

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Our *first scripture reading* includes words from the prophet Jeremiah which reflect the wisdom of Psalm 1. Jeremiah reminds the Israelites using the metaphor of a tree planted by the stream that faith nourishes and sustains us through the droughts of life. (Read Jeremiah 17:5-8.)

In our second scripture reading, found in the gospel of Luke, we learn that trees are also good for climbing. Jesus reaches out unexpectedly to Zacchaeus while in a tree. In Jesus' welcome, Zacchaeus' life is transformed and we begin to understand that the kindness of God is beyond the measure of our minds. Please rise for the gospel reading. (Read Luke 19:1-10.)

The title of the sermon: "Transforming Welcome"

Let us pray. Loving and Gracious God, thank you for surprising us, again and again, with a love that seeks, embraces and affirms us in life-changing ways. May the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen

Sometimes we learn things about our spouses long after we are married, things that really don't surprise us once we hear them but that are unexpected, none the less. This is how I felt when I learned that my husband, Peter, was an avid tree climber as a child, one of the best in his neighborhood. In fact once he began talking about his days as a tree-climber, I could see a glimmer in his eye. He and his friends climbed the Sycamores in Wydown Forest of Clayton where he grew up alongside these strong and sturdy trees. He talked about the tricks of the trade—the ropes and knots they used and the heights of the trees they climbed (some of them 85 feet tall).

This summer I learned that tree-climbing is re-emerging as a recreational sport. Guy Mott, a certified arborist with a master's of education in adventure learning teaches a class in tree climbing at St. Louis Community College and leads team-building activities for camps and organizations through his business "Adventure Tree."

As one of the teachers who participated with students said, "Tree-climbing acts as a powerful metaphor teaching students to conquer challenges and face their fears." We expect children and youth to climb trees, but it is the tax-collector in the Sycamore of Luke's story that surprises and intrigues the reader.

As we continue our journey with Jesus on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus' meeting of Zacchaeus in Jericho is the last encounter Luke records before Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem...before Jesus chooses to climb the tree of Calvary in an act of incredible self sacrifice and generosity.

Zacchaeus, who is small in stature but also very rich, joins the crowd in seeking out Jesus when he comes through their town. Word had spread about this young teacher, who brings good news to the poor, gives sight to the blind and who challenges people to be all they can be. Word has spread about this One who changes people's lives.

We don't know what led Zachaeus to do it, perhaps his faith that may only have been the size of a mustard seed. Whatever it was, *Zachaeus ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see Christ*. Remember in the story of the prodigal son, when the father welcomes home his youngest, he ran to meet him and embrace

him. Commentaries tell us that it was considered shameful and irreverent for a Hebrew man to run. This kind of spontaneous excitement is not becoming for the one who is always to be in control and certainly climbing a tree was too childlike for a man of Zacchaeus' position within the community.

*Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven..." (Matthew 18)*

In essence, Zacchaeus was willing to blow all caution to the wind to get a glimpse of Jesus. Why Jesus stopped and took notice of Zacchaeus, we do not know. Perhaps he was as amazed as everyone else in town to see this powerful man sitting in a sycamore tree. Jesus stops, looks up and invites himself to Zacchaeus' home.

In first century eastern culture, hospitality was held in high esteem. To be a guest in someone's home was an honor and let us not forget that Jesus was criticized for eating with sinners and tax collectors. Zacchaeus' response to Jesus' invitation is priceless. Luke tells us: *So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.*

We learn from the story of Zacchaeus that when we welcome Jesus into our home, into our hearts... we are never the same. Zacchaeus' life is transformed. In the presence of Jesus of Nazareth, he becomes a changed man. The road that he had been journeying as chief tax collector takes a dramatic turn. Although he was successful at what he did and very rich, perhaps he wondered where the road was leading. Zacchaeus was looking for meaning in his life, which he found in the good news Jesus taught.

*What does the Lord require of you, but to seek justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6)*

Zacchaeus' response to being in the presence of God and hearing a genuine call to integrity was one of joy and gratitude...and generosity! He chose to give half of his possessions to the poor and "if" he had defrauded anyone, he would pay them back four times as much. This standard of restitution went beyond what was required in the Hebrew law. Zacchaeus chose to live his life with a new integrity and joy and, through his giving, he welcomed others as Jesus' welcomed him on that day in Jericho. I wonder how often Zacchaeus looked back on the day that changed his life and wondered how his life would have been different had Jesus not traveled through Jericho on that day and had he not climbed that Sycamore.

At a wedding I recently officiated, the couple chose a quote from the novel The Power of One by Bryce Courtenay because it was this book which serendipitously brought them together. The novel is about a young person who learns that he must first know and trust himself before he can create meaningful relationships with those who come into his life. The quote is:

*Sometimes the slightest things change the directions of our lives, the merest breath of a circumstance, a random moment that connects like a meteorite striking the earth. Lives have swiveled and changed direction on the strength of a chance remark.*

Today, we welcome new members who now call Westminster their home; and in the tradition of All Saints, we remember those members of the Westminster family who have been called home and welcomed by a gracious and kind God. We are grateful for the merest breath of a circumstance, the random moment and the chance remark that brought these friends into our lives and this community of faith.

*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. Amen.*