

Climbing Trees

Shepherd's Grace Church

November 3, 2013 (Saints Sunday)

Luke 19:1-10

¹He entered Jericho and was passing through it. ²A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. ⁴So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. ⁵When 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."⁶So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. ⁷All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." ⁸Zacchaeus 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."⁹Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." (Also Read Isaiah 1: 10-18)

Today is a Sunday I look forward to as much as any Sunday during the entire year! I look forward to it as much as Easter and as much as Christmas Sunday. I know that may sound like sacrilege to many but Saints Sunday is a special Sunday for me! It moves us past the problems we have being like Jesus who is perfect, and allows us a glimpse at the lives of others, our heroes and our relatives in whom we can see imperfection but also the light of heaven!

I think these are the ones to whom the Lord was speaking in Isaiah this morning. These Israelites had gotten into habits of coming to worship. They showed up on Sunday morning and made their offerings. Actually they probably showed up on Friday evening at sunset, but no matter that! They came, they brought their offerings and made their sacrifices then they went back to their homes to live the kind of lives of privilege to which they believed they were entitled!

As they left the temple, they passed by the widows who were struggling for their very survival; widows weeping in the women's court! As they walked the street they passed the orphans begging even for a few crumbs. They ignored the opportunities for ministry in their community because, after all, they had already done their share! They had made their offering, they and completed their sacrifice.

Last week in Luke's gospel we met one of these persons. The Pharisee in Luke's gospel who touted his accomplishments to God! I give! He shouted! I sacrifice he exhorted! I am not like these others who can't do much of anything! I do this and I do that and I don't do those things that others do which

would make me less of a faithful person! I am worthy! God, you have blessed me because I have earned it!

The people Isaiah speaks of today believed they had earned their right to salvation! They obeyed the commandments and they fulfilled their obligation...but they walked right by others who were in need and they did nothing. They did not see the necessity. Salvation was all about them. They were the people who could tell you the day and the hour they were saved but who could not tell you the last time they offered food to someone who was hungry or water to someone who was thirsty or shelter to someone who was homeless or clothing to someone who was naked or visited someone who was sick or in prison!

Today we welcome the saints of our congregation to our sanctuary. We have placed their pictures on the altar. We have called aloud their names. We have invited them to worship and we can feel their presence in our hearts! We are delighted that they are with us and we are excited at the memories they stir...however! However at this moment the saints are probably stirring in their seats. At this moment the saints are probably getting a little uncomfortable. At this moment the saints are probably feeling a little convicted!

You see, if our saints could be brutally honest with you this morning they would say they are a lot like the people of Isaiah! They would say they found themselves feeling a little too comfortable with their faith! Many of the saints would tell us this morning that initially they worked very hard at their faith. They would point at the community of Arkansas City or the communities they were part of and proudly profess their involvement in building that community of faith. They would claim ownership in the church they grew up in. Perhaps some would tell stories of how they built the church or of how they were part of the remodeling project that increased the size of the church or Sunday School rooms to meet the growing need their church found in their community!

They would remember all these things and then they would tell you that they later got a little lazy in their work. They found it easier to write a check and let someone else get their hands dirty. They found it a little more palatable to hear stories about the sick and the hurting in far away places and send money to those people than to be confronted by the sick and hurting outside their door! Our saints would be squirming in their seats this morning knowing that there were needs in their town that they might have addressed and yet they failed to do so!

The saints would be squirming...and so should we! In some ways we have become the people Isaiah is talking to this morning. We come to worship. We write our checks. We say our prayers and we go off to believe that God has smiled on our sacrifice...our hour each week spent listening and longing for a deeper relationship while all the time, leaving having been less than satisfied! We want more from our relationship and we can imagine that God wants more also. We can hear God say, "I hate, I detest your

solemn assemblies. I am not satisfied with your offerings and your sacrifices.” We squirm in our seats and we struggle because we are just not getting anything out of our time with the Lord! What the Lord wants to say to us this morning, this Saints Sunday, is “What are you putting in!”

We squirm in our seats because we have not come prepared to worship God in a meaningful way. We have walked all week by the poor, the widowed, the orphaned and we have done little to recognize them much less reach out to them! We squirm because we know that to get involved means we must leave our comfort zone, we must roll up our sleeves and get our hands dirty, we must respond to the needs we see in our world. We squirm because we know the problems of our world are not half a world away in a place we can mail a check to...the problems of our world are right outside our door and we know we have not been willing to do anything about them!

I believe that on this Saints Sunday the Lord meets us right here, right now, right in the middle of our discomfort and as He shares the story of Zacchaeus, I believe he has us in mind. The Lord wants us to learn something from this wee little man this morning and He wants to tie it to our saints to call forth His point.

Look at some of the details of the story. Jesus has come to Jericho. He is on his way to Jerusalem, the place he is going to be condemned, crucified, and killed! We have been on this journey with him since Chapter 9 of Luke’s Gospel. There is no surprise in his destination, but today he has stepped over a boundary on the way. Jericho is a border town. It is in Samaria just across the border from Israel. No Israelite would feel comfortable there. No Israelite would feel comfortable with association with people so vile as the Samaritans. Jesus however crosses a boundary to make a point.

On the road to Jerusalem, there are endless possibilities for transformation, for repentance, for restoring right relationship. These possibilities are not limited to the people of Israel only. They are available to all, even those as despicable as Samaritans. Jesus’ message to us in this boundary crossing is clear! If we are to be his disciples, we must be willing to cross into places that are not as desirable as our own church, our own sanctuary. We must be willing to open our eyes to the poor, the oppressed, the abused. Those in need are looking for Jesus. Those in need are looking beyond our ability to write the check from the comfort of our chair! Those in need, need those who are in need. Jesus wants us to know that “to give from our need is the greatest of gifts.” To be willing to step across a boundary and out of our comfort opens the door to endless possibilities. To be willing to see outside our sanctuary door invites others inside our hearts!

As Jesus enters Jericho, and passes through it he has another message for us. Yes, this is a place that is outside our comfort zone, but it is also more. This is a place where God has worked miracles before! This is a place of reminder for us that God is with us. Jesus enters and He goes through just as God went through before the early Israelites! Jesus entry into Jericho is a reminder that God has broken down

walls in the past and that God will continue to break down walls and barriers and boundaries in our present and in our future. God is not only a God of history, but a God of possibility. What God has accomplished through a prostitute and two spies in a seemingly impossible situation, God can accomplish through other unlikely yet willing participants in anticipation of the coming of the Kingdom of God through God's new and chosen people.

As we recognize the surroundings Jesus has brought us to this morning, as Jesus enters this Jericho and passes through it, at that very moment, an unlikely participant in the coming of the Kingdom, someone viewed as entirely unworthy shows up. Zacchaeus, a resident of Jericho, a tax collector, the chief tax collector, a rich man has heard of Jesus and wants to see him! Those who heard the story for the first time would have been aghast! They would have scoffed and stirred and imagined that Jesus would immediately reject this man.

Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus! We are not told why or what he has heard. We can only draw from our story what we are given. He knows of Jesus and wants to see him. We do not know if he is prepared to confess his sins or if he is, like so many, a curiosity seeker. All we really know is that he wants to see Jesus. Zacchaeus, however is unable to do so. He is "short of stature." He is kept from viewing Jesus because others get in his way. Others keep him from that which he wants. The phrase "short of stature" is translated in exactly the same way as the "little or small" who want to come to Jesus earlier in Luke's gospel.

Earlier, it is the disciples who try to keep the "little or small" ones away from Jesus as people bring the little children to him. Jesus admonishes the disciples, "Let the little ones come to me, for it is to such as these that the Kingdom of Heaven belongs!" Now this "small one" is restricted by others. It is amazing how frequently our path to Jesus is blocked by others. When we desire to seek the Lord, others keep us from seeing by blocking our vision.

Some block us by offering the ways of the world. They remind us that we can have great wealth and treasure in this world. We can be comfortable and continue in our effort to keep up with the Joneses. They keep us from seeing Jesus by instilling fear in us that resources in God's created world are somehow limited and we must get ours at the expense of others. As a chief tax collector, Zacchaeus would have known these temptations.

Others keep us from seeing Jesus by telling us about their ministry. They encourage us to give to their cause and to send our resources to other places so that we have no resources to do the work God calls us to in this place! The saints of Isaiah's message were kept from seeing God's true call to them because they wanted to stay within their own boundaries and refused to see the need right outside their own door! Jesus didn't cross far into a foreign land. He just moved outside his own door to find the need that existed in the world, the ministry God was calling Him to! Some would say to us, don't take care of

the ones who have come here and don't speak the language. Some would say to us, don't take care of the ones who have drug or alcohol addictions. Some would say to us, don't get your hands dirty building homes in your own community. Let us take what you have and send it away from here to do ministry in other places so you don't have to be disgusted at the ugliness of the world. Those who would say these things are genuinely concerned about God's work. They want others to see Jesus! Their message is attractive, but it is not the message of God for us. That message comes from the saints this Sunday. It comes from Jesus this Sunday. It is the message of hope that Jesus offers just outside our doors! We must never lose sight of this message!

Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus! Others were keeping him from his goal. Instead of giving up, Zacchaeus persevered. He pushed through the crowds, the people who were keeping him from seeing Jesus and moved to a position more favorable to his goal. He didn't have to go far. He just had to go to the right place. He had to know Jesus' route. Zacchaeus' objective was not for Jesus to see him, but for him to see Jesus. He knew he could be off the path a little but that if he could get above the crowd, to someplace where others were not blocking his vision he could accomplish his goal!

One summer, my brother Steve, one of the saints who is in worship with us this morning, and I decided we wanted to build a tree house. We found a great tree. It was a cottonwood, common here in Kansas. We borrowed dad's ladder and gathered materials. We hammered and cut and nailed and pounded and finally we had our tree house. We climbed down the ladder and went to the kitchen of our house to get some food to take up to the house. When we came back the ladder was gone.

We looked around and found that my grandpa, dad's day, had showed up and was about to begin a painting project. He had taken the ladder and moved it to where he needed it. Steve and I went over to see if we could get the ladder back. When we asked, grandpa said no. We complained that without the ladder we had no way of getting to our tree house. Grandpa stopped what he was doing and looked at our project. He then gave us two words of advice. Work together.

Steve and I stared at him and at each other and then we walked off dejectedly to ponder the advice he had given. Work together! What did he mean? We had been working together. All morning we had worked to build the tree house and not once had we argued or fought. We had accomplished a great thing and not that thing was out of our reach. Work together! What kind of help was that!

I think if we would listen to the saints in our congregation this morning they would chuckle a little at the predicament my brother and I found ourselves in. They would smile because they would know that the secret to faith work is the same as the secret to the tree house! In the congregations built by our saints no two people had the same gift. Some were teachers, some were builders, some were cooks, some were preachers and as they struggled to overcome the obstacles that kept them from seeing Jesus they learned that they had to work together. They had to share their gifts and their graces in order to gain

the vision they sought. Along the way of their faith journey they discovered those who were in need. They discovered the poor, the sick, the hungry and the homeless! The only way they were able to accomplish their desire to see Jesus was to see him through them. In order to do that, they had to work together to share their stories of faith, to share their gifts of food! They had to work together.

Steve and I pondered our problem. We recognized that one of us could help the other up to the first branch of the tree and then that one could climb on up to the tree house. That was great for one, but it still left the other on the ground. We talked and thought and finally we looked and came upon a rope that would be long enough for one of us to tie onto the first branch. Once one of us got up, he could tie the rope to the limb and throw it down to the other!

We began to put our plan in place. We secured the rope over Steve's shoulder and I began to boost him up. He started with his foot in my hands and grabbed on to the tree. I lifted and he stepped up to my shoulder. From my shoulder he had to step on my head and from there he was able to reach the branch. Success! Steve had gotten to the limb. There he tied the rope securely and threw it down to me. I was about 10 years old at the time and had no upper body strength. I pulled and fought with the rope to no avail. I was unable to hoist myself up to the first branch.

Throughout this whole process, grandpa had been watching our progress. Finally after watching us struggle for a long time he came across to where we were. He talked to me for awhile about what we were trying to do and then nodded his approval. When I explained to him that I was unable to climb the rope he smiled. He said, "That's because you are doing it wrong!" Duh! I thought to myself. Then he showed me how to put the rope over one of my feet and under the other as I used my arms to shimmy up the rope. In effect, his approach created a kind of step for me so I could walk up the rope instead of climbing. The process worked the first time and I was able to join Steve in the tree house!

Sometimes, even by working together we are not able to accomplish our objective until we know all we need to know. I do not know if Zacchaeus was able to climb the tree by himself, but I do know that he did not yet know all he needed to know about his objective. In Zacchaeus' desire to see Jesus, he did not know that through his effort, Jesus would also see him! Zacchaeus wanted to gain a different perspective on Jesus so he climbed high and from his new position he could see all he wanted.

In our effort to see Jesus are we willing to give ourselves a different perspective from which to view him? How is your prayer life? Do you learn from your saints the power of being in conversation with God? They would tell us that daily commitment to prayer is essential to seeing Jesus. How is your life in the word? Do you read the Bible daily? Do you reflect on what it means in your daily life? Do you think about what it means and apply its principles to your life? Do you study with others? Do you attend Bible study? Do you prepare and challenge yourself to come to study with questions that will help you and others understand more deeply the message God has for you? How is your work life? Do you find

ministries in the church to be involved with or are you content to simply show up on Sunday morning thinking your presence is sufficient?

Zacchaeus, this offensive, tax collecting rich person recognized that if he wanted to see Jesus he would have to change his perspective. When we come on Sunday morning and we feel we have gotten nothing out of the worship service, perhaps it is because we have not heard God calling us to change our perspective, to look at His word in a different way, to engage the message from a different place! The saints who are sharing worship with us this morning knew this. My grandpa knew this. You and I know it too! We just have to decide if we are going to be willing to do it!

We do have to be careful however. When we start to work together it is just possible that Jesus will see us at the same time we see him. It is possible that he will call to us, that he will invite us to serve him, that He will expect us to respond! That is what happened to Zacchaeus. He was called, he was changed, he repented of his past sins and committed to a new life!

For all the Saints who are here this morning there is a knowledge of what that life can mean. It is not a life of privilege but a life of service. It comes not from our lack but from our abundance. It is not diminished by our giving but rather it is increased as we reap the rewards of deeper and more complete relationships with our neighbors and with God. It invites us to cross boundaries, to step outside our doors and welcome the orphaned, the widowed, the oppressed and the abused! The saints know this and they have just two words to leave with us this morning.

Whether we are climbing trees or aspiring to the fullness of a relationship with God we can never accomplish our objective alone. Their message today...Work Together! Amen!