

Following the Finding God

1- Marks of the 21st Century Church – Following After Jesus

Exodus 14:10-15

Luke 19:1-10

August 22, 2010

Rally Day

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Such commotion at Zacchaeus' place. Lights ablaze, music pouring forth, songs of mirth and merriment, wine flows, caterers arriving every few minutes with more meats and vegetables and baked goods. Zacchaeus' house always looked perfect, shrubs neatly trimmed by the gardeners, rooms sparkling clean by domestics who served this wealthy high official of Rome. It is not hard to keep up a place if nobody is crossing the threshold.

Yet tonight it is altogether different. People pack the house of the short little rich man. Jesus among them, along with his disciples. For all its loveliness, Zacchaeus' has been the loneliest place in Jericho. Nobody every accepted an invitation to dinner with him. Nor did he extend one. Zacchaeus could not be trusted. He was a cheat and a scoundrel. As he extracted the taxes for his overlords and himself, he lied and deceived of his fellow Jews.

But tonight it is different. Music! Lights! Laughter! Joy! A great banquet to which Jesus has invited himself. "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today," The grace of God that appeared for all people has appeared to Zacchaeus, and been welcomed. "He made haste, and came down, and received him joyfully." A meal prepared, a party begun. Restitution made- repayment 4 times over to all those Zacchaeus has defrauded, and half his possessions given to the poor, that very night.

I

It all began that morning, as word was spreading through the area that Jesus was coming through Jericho. The ancient little town 17 miles east of Jerusalem near the Dead Sea was astir. Jesus was coming through. Jesus, who had taught up along the lakeshore and healed the lame and the blind. Even that very day out on the edges of Jericho a poor blind beggar had received his sight from Jesus. Now Jesus is passing through town and the crowd swells.

Zacchaeus is curious. He has a keen mind. Astute at number crunching, he has risen to the rank of chief tax collector through a combination of sharp intellect and shady deals, good connections and readiness to take advantage of a person's hard luck. The list is long of those Jericho townsfolk Zacchaeus has evicted from their homes in order to extract their tax and his cut. Zacchaeus is curious about this Jesus. What is his secret? Why is he so popular? Is he the promised Messiah? Or maybe Zacchaeus simply wants to be sure Jesus is following through on that dramatic example of being a good citizen of

the Empire himself by paying his own tax to the emperor, like he taught. The whole country is astir with rumors about Jesus, and Zacchaeus wants to see for himself.

Unfortunately, no one around invites Zacchaeus to watch Jesus come through from their front porch. No one ever invites Zacchaeus to do anything. Zacchaeus is rich, but despised. As Frederick Buechner described him, “He was a sawed-off little social disaster with a big bank account and a crooked job.”ⁱ Besides, even if he had been invited by someone, he is too short to see over their heads anyway.

But one thing about Zacchaeus, he is resourceful. One does not survive as Rome’s chief tax collector in the region without being resourceful. So, wanting to see Jesus, he simply runs ahead of the crowd, climbs up in a sycamore tree and anonymously, all by himself, observes Jesus passing by from there.

II

Yet as he approaches, Jesus looks right at him, and calls him by name, “Zacchaeus.” He calls his name. The despised rich outcast is seen and addressed personally by the Savior, who says, of all things, “I must stay at your house today.” Jesus had a bad reputation - growing reputation with the establishment for hanging out with the worst sorts - tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners. Near the beginning of his ministry he had called to another tax collector, Levi, better known as Matthew, who is now in the company of the disciples coming through town. Once Jesus described the way the folk of his region were comparing him to his Baptist cousin John, who lived a strict rigid life, never let alcohol touch his lips, ate locusts, wore camel hair shirts and lived in the desert. By contrast, Jesus says, “The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’”ⁱⁱ Friend of sinners he is.

This friend of sinners looks up at one of the chief sinners and invites himself to his house. For Jesus, this is no awkward begrudging request for an uncomfortable painful invitation. For Jesus this is the active, intensive searching for this particular sinner and announcement that he is coming to dwell at his house. Of all in the crowd that day, Jesus chooses Zacchaeus.

III

Hence the celebration. Hence, the extravagant welcome implied by the text. Zacchaeus, no longer the anonymous observer up in a tree, hurries down and makes preparation for his Savior. Not only is extensive hospitality offered, but long-term restitution for those who have been wronged is extended. Jesus does not lay out a list of requirements that Zacchaeus must fulfill in order to become acceptable. Zacchaeus, rather, initiates an extensive program on his own. Restitution for those he has wronged four-times over repayment, and also caring for the poor in an ongoing way, “half of my possessions I will give to the poor.” Even Democrats would not do that! This is God’s economics. Thus Jesus states the miracle, “Today salvation has come to this house.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Salvation, the great end and goal and center of our faith. Salvation, our hoped for, prayed for, longed for destination, but more, salvation, our present lived life as we are dwelling in Jesus Christ. Salvation is God's free gift of deliverance. Salvation is the gift of the God who searches for and finds each one of us. The God who will not leave us to sulk alone up in a tree, but calls us into community. The God who invites himself into our house and there makes his home. Salvation is both God's work in Jesus Christ, what God freely does for us in the life, and death and resurrection of Jesus, and also God's work in us, what God freely does in us as we grow in this life of Jesus.

This is an exciting day at South Highland. The place is abuzz with energy and excitement. Rally Day is our opportunity to engage, to connect, to, as John Claypool put it, "reestablish a relation of trust at the deepest level between the human creatures and the Ultimate Creator."^{iv} Today we are celebrating, we are feasting, we are voting, we are welcoming new people and considering new ventures.

Oh I know, for some Rally Day connotes the old "well here we go again for another year of church activities". But friends, I believe this day is opportunity for something more. I believe God is seeking each of us individually, and seeking us as a body, for an exciting and significant new season of ministry and mission. I believe this is God's special Kairos time and Jesus is coming to our house.

IV

Last Wednesday evening turned into such a special Kairos time for twelve of us gathered in a classroom to begin some important work the Session has called for. Jesus came among us. The Session had asked Mike Goodrich and Chad Fooshee to gather a group, bring in a consultant, and put together what we were then calling "a Long-Range Strategic Plan" for South Highland, something we have done before, most recently in 1996. We had a few organizational meetings early in the summer. But this was our first big meeting with our new consultant Tom Thompson.

I have to tell you, we were led into some amazing and spirit-filled moments over the two and a half hours we met together Wednesday evening. What started out as an information gathering and priority setting evening, turned into a God-Moment - a Kairos time. We sensed Jesus' presence among us, and in and with this church. For one thing, while we know there are organizational matters to be dealt with and priorities to be set, we will no longer be focusing per se on a "Long-Range Strategic Plan". We trust that will come. We have not forgotten that.

But we sense clearly we are more significantly called to be seeking God's Horizon for South Highland asking, where is God leading us? What is God calling us to be and do? And in this discernment every one of you is needed; your thoughts, your ideas, your vision, but most of all your prayers. You are a part of this process. And whatever is over God's horizon for us is going to be made clear only by prayer. Of that we feel certain.

V

These are uncertain times for us all. The economy is in a rough patch. Some of you have lost jobs. All of you, unless you are fully invested in gold, have watched your retirement savings diminish. Institutions and people we have trusted have let us down. Even in the church. There is a sense of dis-ease about. Polarized extremist viewpoints are shouted, varied depending on which network you watch. Oil settles unseen in the depths of the Gulf, and waters flood 20% of Pakistan.

Yet, in such a time, God is at work, seeking us, calling us by name, establishing footholds of salvation among us.

As the Israelites were in their initial stages of departure from Egypt, they looked back over their shoulders and saw the armies of Pharaoh hard upon them. The people let Moses have it with their fearful cries. But Moses, filled with God's Spirit said courageously, "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still." ^v

Then the Lord clarified his plan for Moses and the people, "Tell the Israelites to go forward."^{vi} Interesting mix isn't it? Stand still in order to go forward. If we are to do the work of the people of God we must first be the people of God. If we are to be a Church, brightly blazing from this beautiful stone-hewn cathedral on the Southside, from our homes, from our small group gatherings, from our workplaces and schools, radiating out to a hurting and needy world, we must be shaped and formed and transformed by this Jesus who sees and seeks us, and invites himself to where we live.

Remember this encounter with Zacchaeus in Luke 19 takes place as Jesus is making his final approach to Jerusalem and the Cross that awaits him. The Palm Sunday entrance is only 18 verses away. Yet, Jesus has time and focus to be present with a rich tax collector, and before that with a poor blind beggar. He repeatedly dines at the table of tax collectors and sinners. N.T. Wright, renowned British New Testament Scholar says, Jesus was crucified because of the company he kept at the table. Because he sat down with anyone and everyone. Because he welcomed anyone and everyone. Because in the Kingdom he was bringing about all are welcomed in wide-open hospitality. This threatened the traditions of his day. And because he kept reaching out and down to the likes of Zacchaeus, they hung him on a tree.

We need to be following Jesus. We need him as never before, really need him, not as window dressing but as substance if we are to be a vital vibrant Church, if we are to be vital and vibrant disciples of Jesus Christ in the 21st Century. As John Calvin said, "In the conversion of the life to God, we require a transformation not only in external works, but in the soul itself."^{vii} The Renovated Soul that is the path we are on.

As most of you know, this summer I had opportunity to participate with six minister colleagues in a spiritual quest through Bangladesh and India. I have written a bit about it in the recent Highlights and will look forward to sharing varied aspects of our experiences with you in the months ahead. In my daily journal on that trip I wrote, and I

feel this not only about that trip, but about what God is calling us into together as a congregation,

“This trip has been a profound spiritual and cultural blessing for me. I do not know the full ramifications of how it will affect my ministry, but I know it will. I come back with a sense of yearning to see our South Highland congregation become committed to “Radical Discipleship” and transcend the dying cultural Protestant churchmanship that has no power to transform. I come back with a sense of the Call upon us as followers of Christ to really bear our share of Christ’s cross. I seek bigger eyes, mind, heart and ears to encounter the other and sense God’s mysterious working with people.”^{viii}

“Zacchaeus, Bob, Mary, Tom, Catherine, hurry and come down,; for I must stay at your house today.” You see, “today salvation has come to this house.”

“Tell the Israelites to go forward!”

ⁱ Frederick Buechner, Peculiar Treasures, p. 180.

ⁱⁱ Luke 7:34.

ⁱⁱⁱ Luke 19:9.

^{iv} John Claypool, The Preaching Event, p.30.

^v Exodus 14:13-14.

^{vi} Exodus 14:15

^{vii} John Calvin, Day By Day with John Calvin, “The Renovated Soul”, on Jeremiah 4:1-2. August 20, p. 232.

^{viii} Ed Hurley, “Highlights”, The Pastor’s Perspective, , August 18, 2010, Vol 43, Nu. 13.