

Pentecost XXIII (26c)

31 October 2010

Lk 19.1-10

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Since becoming a father – as in the sense of being the male progenitor of a child – I have learned a couple things, as you might expect. By being the father of our little 2-yr-old Lucy in particular, I have learned some very particular and peculiar things. And not greatest, but not least, either, is this: women of a certain age are utterly “bewitched, bothered, and bewildered” by a head full of curly hair on a toddler. The other day as Lucy and I cruised the aisles of the Piggly-Wiggly for apple sauce and Juicy Juice, there was a three buggy pileup induced by this curly-haired-child fixation. In restaurants, women of this class leave their meals and dining companions and make their way trancelike across the dining room to the side of Lucy’s highchair; it’s as if they are drawn by a tractor beam to touch her curls.

I guess we all have these things that catch our attention. I myself have pulled the car over more than once and hopped a fence to peak at 1970’s-vintage center console Aquasport hull in a stranger’s backyard. Some things, either due to our own personal predilections or by their sheer oddness just grab our attention; they make us stop and look.

In this morning’s Gospel lesson, our Lord sees something which stops him in his tracks, the kind of thing he could not just pass by without examining more closely. And in this thing – this person, as it turns out – and in Jesus’ stopping, we are given a picture which illustrates with exquisite clarity the mission of Jesus Christ in the world – why he has come, and for whom.

We read that Jesus “entered Jericho and was passing through.” He is in some haste. In fact, he is a man on a mission. He is on his way to Jerusalem, for the last time, and Luke has earlier told us that “his face was set for Jerusalem” (Lk 9.51,53). Just prior to this entrance into Jericho, Jesus has told his disciples for the third time that he intends to go to Jerusalem: “Look, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. And after flogging him, they will kill him” (Lk 18.31-33).

Though the apostles tried to dissuade him, and indeed many disciples would leave him rather than go with him, that is where he is going; he is determined. Jerusalem is just another 30 miles or so from Jericho, and Jesus will soon be there. So Jesus *is passing through Jericho*, not intending to stop, not intending to take in the sights – to visit the famous springs and balsam groves, or even to ponder the ruins of those ancient walls that came tumbling down at Israel’s trumpet blast.

He was on his way, *passing through*, not even intending to stop for a meal – until he saw this thing that brought him up short and stopped him in his tracks. A man, a plainly wealthy man, a rather short-statured man by the name of Zacchaeus, was sitting in on a tree limb, himself trying to see Jesus.

We often, I think, tend to pass lightly over this account as a mere children’s story. In fact, I Googled “Zacchaeus” (which you should take as a sign of curiosity and not of desperation) and the search returned page after page after page of children’s Sunday School lesson plans, complete with songs, crafts, and skits. And after all, that makes sense. It’s a great story for children. Zacchaeus is small, and children are small. Zacchaeus had trouble seeing in a crowd, and children have trouble seeing in crowds. Zacchaeus climbed a

tree, and children like to climb trees. And, most importantly, Jesus loved Zacchaeus, and so also he loves little children.

But we grownups need ourselves to remember the importance Jesus placed on this encounter, as we shall see, and also that, despite the child-charming detail of his diminutive size, Zacchaeus himself was fully an adult and a rather unsavory character at that. In fact, his neighbors would have avoided him, except perhaps to take the occasional opportunity to hurl an insult, if not a stone, and would have encouraged their children to do the same.

Zacchaeus was a tax collector, actually a chief tax collector. Which meant that though he was a Jew, he was a collaborator with the hated Romans against his own people. He was essentially an extortionist with the weight of the Roman Empire behind him – making his money, becoming rich, on the backs of his neighbors and kinsmen. Tax collectors were despised as Quislings and betrayers and were banned from the synagogues and from the homes and dinner tables of respectable people.

A couple years ago, in the aftermath of the Bernard Madoff scandal, which revealed that in history's largest Ponzi scheme Madoff had defrauded thousands of charitable organizations, entire governments, and most of all ordinary working men and women – his own neighbors – who had entrusted him with their savings for retirement, of billions and billions of dollars, a prominent New York rabbi was quoted in the *New York Times* (12/23/08) as saying,

*It is not possible for him [Madoff] to atone for all the damage he did and I don't even think that there is a punishment that is commensurate with the crime, for the wreckage of lives that he's left behind. The only thing he could do, for the rest of his life, is work for redemption that he would never achieve.*

“Not possible to atone... a redemption he would never achieve.” I think there is something in that. And that exactly is the way the good citizens of Jericho viewed their local chief tax collector. Which explains why he had to climb a tree to see Jesus as much as his lack of height does: folks might make room at the front for a friend or even an acquaintance, but not for an enemy, and certainly not for Zacchaeus.

But we might ask, why did Zacchaeus care about seeing Jesus at all?

Obviously lots of folks did; there were crowds in Jericho and soon there will be crowds in Jerusalem. Many had great hopes for Jesus, that he might be a messiah, conceived of as a political and military leader who would unite the people to throw off the yoke of Roman oppression. But of course Zacchaeus profited from Roman oppression; it was working out pretty well for him.

And it may be that many more were simply curious – curious to get a glimpse of this famed teacher and healer who was apparently headed for a confrontation with the religious leaders in Jerusalem.

But would that get Zacchaeus into a tree? Jewish men of Zacchaeus' wealth and station simply didn't do that kind of thing, and the robes a rich man like Zacchaeus would have worn would have made it next to impossible anyway; in fact, he probably had to strip down to his foundation garments to *run ahead of Jesus* get up that sycamore tree. The whole episode is humiliating. Does a wealthy man like Zacchaeus abandon his dignity to get a passing glimpse of a celebrity? (In modern America, Yes, I'm afraid, but not in ancient Palestine.)

So why? If not for political passion, if not for simple curiosity, why this undignified, humiliating effort just to lay eyes on this itinerant rabbi?

It may be that Zacchaeus had heard the rumors, certainly those rumors that made Jesus a celebrity – that his teaching touched men’s souls and upset power structures, that he was a healer, even that he had raised the dead. But maybe it was not so much the rumors of Jesus’ fame that had piqued his curiosity as what we might call the “rumors of complaint” – those things about Jesus that were the source of controversy and even hate, those things that made Jesus an outsider. The people grumbled – or *murmered*, we read in our translation – at Zacchaeus, and we can understand why. But some also murmured at Jesus, and that murmuring, that grumbling, explains a great deal, and it may be in that murmuring was Zacchaeus’ great hope.

St. Luke has already told us about that murmuring. On one occasion we read that “tax collectors and sinners were drawing near to Jesus, and the Pharisees and scribes,” the religiously well-to-do, “murmured that *this man receives sinners and eats with them*” (Lk 15.1,2) And even earlier in Luke’s gospel we read that Jesus called a man named Matthew, a tax collector himself, now walking with Jesus through Jericho to Jerusalem, to be his friend and disciple – and that when he did so, when Jesus called Matthew, the Pharisees and scribes “murmured... saying, ‘*Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners*’ (Lk 5.27-32)?” It’s enough to imagine that those murmers, those rumors of complaint, made their way around the tax collector’s listserve.

A rich man like Zacchaeus can always find smiling company, but the fact was that he was unloved and generally scorned, and understandably so. And not because he was a social outsider, or an economic outsider, or an ethnic outsider, but because he was a moral outsider; he was a Bernie Madoff. The people of Jericho had no regard and no hope for this tax collector and traitor.

But the very reason that some are complaining and grumbling against Jesus gives Zacchaeus hope – dignity defying, tree climbing hope. The rumors of complaint are his good news: *This man, this Jesus, receives and eats with, loves and forgives, tax collectors and sinners.*

That explains why Zacchaeus is in the tree, and it also tells us why Jesus – this man in haste, this man on a mission – stopped in his tracks beneath the sycamore tree. He sees this man, this plainly desperate man, and announces, *Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today.* I must stay, he says; it is a personal necessity. And why? Jesus himself tells us at the conclusion of the meal he shares at Zacchaeus’ home, a meal during which Zacchaeus began to show the fruit of repentance by giving alms and making restitution to those he had defrauded: *For the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost.*

Jesus was passing through Jericho, and he was passing by the smugly respectable and self-satisfied, those who believed they had nothing to confess, no restitution to make, and owed no gratitude begetting generosity, past the murmerers who would keep themselves apart from Zacchaeus’ of this world.

The salvation, the rescue, of Zacchaeus, and of everyone like him, is the mission of Christ. For this, for the recovery of this lost soul, is exactly what I am here for, declares Jesus. Zacchaeus is the perfect illustration, his repentance and return the perfect enactment, of my mission.

But Jesus is still passing through, still on his way to Jerusalem, and shortly he will be there. Zacchaeus climbed a tree to see Jesus, and Jesus will climb another tree to save Zacchaeus. The atonement Zacchaeus, and you and I, and Bernie Madoff could never make, the redemption we could never achieve, he will make and he will achieve.

Jesus stops, he stoops, to lift the poor, the desperate, the sinners who need – and know that they need – his grace, mercy, and love. He stops, he climbs the tree of his Cross for Zacchaeus and for you and for me, and on this Altar will share a meal with us, by sharing himself with us.

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