

Series: The Words of Jesus in Intimate Conversations

Today: Jesus and Zacchaeus

Text: Luke 19:1-10

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.

Sunday, August 16, 2009

First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

For nearly a year now we have been spending our Sunday mornings looking at the words of Jesus. Our series will draw to a close in a few weeks, but I want to tell you what a privilege it has been for me to have had this as our focus. Perhaps, like many of you, I have discovered that there are words which Jesus spoke that were familiar, but there have also been words that I had never taken the time to study in depth. I have discovered again that the One whom I claim as my Lord and my Savior is worthy of my allegiance. His message to his Jewish brothers and sisters was and is clear: the all powerful, unknowable God chose them as a nation to be a demonstration plot for the Kingdom of God on the earth, and that God will be faithful to them in all circumstances of life. His message to those who were not Jews was also clear: God has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, and if you will follow the way of Jesus, it will lead you to a relationship with God that is full of God's love and mercy.

The conversation we are focusing on this morning should be a familiar one, if you have spent any time in church at all. It is between Jesus and a tax collector named Zacchaeus. We teach it to our youngest children in a song you may have taught to your children because it shows them that Jesus loves everyone, even the most unlovable. Do you remember it? It goes like this:

Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he.
He climbed up in a sycamore tree for the Lord he wanted to see.
And as the Savior passed that way, He looked up in that tree,
And He said, "Zacchaeus, you come down!
I'm going to your house today.
I'm going to your house to stay"

Zacchaeus is a little man. He is both short of stature and short on character. He makes his living as a mercenary for the Roman government. He collects taxes for Rome, and as you might imagine, that did not make him very popular. People's attitude toward taxes was not much different in the first century than it is in the twenty-first century. However, the situation Zacchaeus found himself in was compounded by the fact that these taxes were imposed on the Jews not by themselves, but by a foreign occupier. He made his living by collecting the taxes and putting a surcharge on them for his services. He abused his authority in order to make a living. He was despised by his employer as well as his clients. He had few friends. His family could not be proud of him. He was lonely, isolated and alone. Yet what we have in this story is a case study of what it means for someone to find their way into the Kingdom of God.

For 13 years now it has been one of our goals to reach out to people like Zacchaeus to help spiritually homeless people find a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives by offering them a relationship with the God whom we experience in Jesus Christ. This morning I want to suggest to you that his experience gives us a model of how change takes place in the life of a spiritually homeless person. Three words may help you to remember this sermon: Recognition; Restitution; and Restoration.

RECOGNITION

The experience of change begins for Zacchaeus with recognition that there is something missing in his life. He is the one who climbed the tree so that he might see Jesus. Something was going on in his life that made him want to be part of the crowd that was greeting Jesus that day. Something made him ready to listen.

Perhaps this is the single most important lesson we can learn when it comes to evangelism. Most of us are turned off by people who are manipulative; who have a message

they want to share with us whether or not we want to listen. We cannot force people to believe. Conversion does not take place because we have coerced someone into our way of looking at the world. However, we can be sensitive to the teachable moments in life when our neighbors, our friends, are ready to hear the good news of God's love for them in Jesus Christ.

Think about that for a moment. There are those times in all of our lives when we are more vulnerable to admit that we need the power of God in our lives, aren't there? Those times when we have come to the end of our human resources and we cry out to God: "*HELP!*" There are those moments when we recognize, or at least we hope, there is a power greater than ourselves who is in charge of the universe. The birth of a child; the death of someone we love; the ending of a relationship; the loss of a job; the feeling of being overwhelmed when we have bitten off more than we can chew. There are those moments in each of our lives when we, like Zacchaeus, have climbed a tree longing to see something or hear something that will help us make sense of life; a moment of recognition when we know we need someone or something that will help us make it through a difficult moment.

These are the times that we need to be Jesus for others. Jesus looked up in the tree and notices Zacchaeus. He does not leave him without resources. He calls him from the tree and offers to be a part of his life.

At the end of our mission trip to Kiambaa last summer, our son, Tim, and I took a few days in another part of Kenya we had never seen: Mombasa. It was there I came to appreciate Tim's gift for recognizing the needs of others and sharing the Gospel in a non-threatening way.

Our hotel was right on the shores of the Indian Ocean, and wanting to say that we had taken a swim in another ocean, we were eager to get to the beach. However, we had no sooner taken our first steps onto the sand when we were surrounded by beach boys who were insistent

about selling us trinkets they had brought with them in order to make a living for their families. Poverty in Kenya is so pervasive that there is virtually nowhere you can escape it, but it made me angry that we could not walk on a beach without being targeted for a handout. I left the beach to nurse my anger, but Tim stayed to talk with the boys. Many of them were about his age, and they had questions about America and what life was really like there. He listened to their hopes and dreams about their future, and he shared his hopes and dreams with them. He honored the fact that they were people of value and worth in his life. He recognized them.

An hour and a half later he was still there, and when I went to tell him we needed to get ready for our dinner, the boys gathered around me again. However, this time it was not to sell trinkets. It was to tell me that my son was different from all the other white people who come to that resort. *“Tim listens to us. He shows us the love of God. He tells us you are a pastor, but he is a better pastor than you are.”*

You know what? They were right. Tim was a better pastor than I was because he was not all caught up in his own needs. He took the time to listen. He took time to recognize them.

Listen to what Bruce Larson has written about his portion of the passage: *“If you were a novelist, how would you write the dialogue? Who would do most of the talking? Did Jesus tell Zacchaeus all about God, conversion, prayer and Christian ethics? Was Jesus the great, inexhaustible fountain of wisdom and Zacchaeus the passive recipient? Or is it possible that when you are in the presence of God, He asks about you?”* Larson concludes: *‘We don’t have any record of what actually happened, but I have a feeling that when you sit in the presence of Ultimate Love, you are on the agenda.’* (Communicators Commentary, Luke, p. 271)

Friends, we live in a world where people are hungry for recognition. It is a world where people sit for hours in front of their computers having dialogues with strangers they will never

meet because they feel like no one listens to them in their daily routine. People are hungry for someone to acknowledge who they are and where they hurt. It is the only way Jesus knew to reach people like Zacchaeus.

RESTITUTION

Having recognized the need of Zacchaeus, let's look at his response to the love of God in Jesus. He makes restitution for all he has taken from those whom he has cheated. The Jewish way to salvation is through the twofold path of repentance and reparation. In Jewish tradition, it is not enough to simply be sorry for what one has done. The offender must also make a pledge to restore whatever damage he has caused. Having pledged to give half of all he has to the poor and to pay anyone whom he has defrauded four times over, he is allowed to be accepted as part of the community again. Knowledge of the love and grace of God is not enough! We have to be willing to make amends to those we have hurt.

Those who are familiar with the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous know that the addict will never be sober until they can be free from the guilt and shame of things they did while in their addiction. So step #8 as the recovering person to *make a list of all people they have harmed and become willing to make amends to them all*. Step #9 is a follow-up: *"make direct amends to such people except when to do so would injure them or others."* The recovery community has discovered the biblical truth of Zacchaeus. You cannot be spiritually whole until you have made amends.

RESTORATION

The final stage in the change that comes to Zacchaeus is restoration. He has recognized his own need, and he has been recognized by Jesus. As a result, his life is changed. He makes

restitution, and as a result, Jesus tells him that he is restored to the community of faith of his mother and father. He is welcomed back into the family of God; the household of faith.

What Zacchaeus longed for more than anything else was to know that he belonged to somebody; that he was important to somebody. We can know that God loves us and we can do all the right things in life, but until we know that we fit in, that we belong, our conversion is not complete.

Tony Campolo tells a Hasidic story of a great celebration in heaven after the Israelites are delivered from the Egyptians at the Red Sea, and the Egyptian armies are drowned. The angels are cheering and dancing. Everyone in heaven is full of joy.

Then one of the angels asks the archangel Michael, "Where is God? Why isn't God here celebrating?"

Michael answers, "God is not here because he is off by himself weeping. You see, many thousands were drowned today." [Source: *Tony Campolo, Let Me Tell You a Story (Word Publishing, 2000)*]

CONCLUSION

Do you catch the meaning, my friends? It is in the heart of God that all should be restored to the community of faith; not just the easy ones. Not just the ones who look and talk and act like we do. Until all have come into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ, God is not happy.

That is our job. We are to recognize the needs of others and touch them at the point of that need; love them like Jesus loved Zacchaeus. We are to help them make their amends to those they have harmed. And we are to draw them into the community of faith where they can experience the joy of their salvation; today, tomorrow and forever.