



FROM THE PULPIT

North Shore Congregational Church

“Behind His Back”

Rev. Dr. Martin W. Hall – Preaching

Luke 19: 1-10; Matthew 25: 1-13

September 17, 2017

I have to admit that I have always struggled, a little, with the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus. Over the years I have heard, and preached, countless sermons on this story. The story of Zacchaeus ranks up there with the parable of the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son and others as some of the most frequently cited sermon texts in the Bible. And, without fail, every sermon on Zacchaeus focuses on what is, generally, the feel-good side of this story. There is a message in this sermon that speaks to the openness, acceptance, and grace that is inherent to the love of God. This vilified, demonized, hated tax collector has to climb a tree to as much as get a glimpse of Jesus coming by. Jesus, on the other hand, doesn't miss a beat in reaching out to Zacchaeus. While the 'righteous' scorned and scoffed, Jesus reached out in love and mercy, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." The story, for most of us, brings a smile to the face.

There are a number of messages that can be drawn from this promise-oriented side of the story of Zacchaeus.

- You could focus on the portion of the story in which Zacchaeus attempts to see Jesus and Jesus responds. You could focus on a message of Jesus being there whenever we seek him.
- You could focus on the portion of the story that reflects upon Zacchaeus' ill-fated personality. You could bring forth a message of grace and acceptance as exemplified by Jesus in the story.
- You could even focus on a little bit of challenge, and you could focus on the faithful change on the part of Zacchaeus. You could show how Zacchaeus responded to the presence of Jesus and really turned his life around.

All of these are very positive, and I believe faithful, messages that can be drawn from the story. All of these tend to empower us and remind us of all of the hope that exists in our faith – which is never a bad thing! At the same time, however, I have struggled, at times, with the lack of attention to the other side of this story – to the challenge it presents to the 21st century Christian. Because, when you really look at it, no matter how much we may lift him up, the truth is that

Zacchaeus' actions in this story don't exactly line up the heroic persona often portrayed in the common messages we draw from it.

Think back to your fifth-grade classroom. It is a beautiful spring day in April. The sun is out, not a cloud in the sky. You don't know the temperature for sure, but it's nice enough that you were able to leave your jacket at home as you came in to school that morning. Spring break starts tomorrow, school is over in about an hour, and Mrs. Stevens, your teacher, just got called out into the hallway and said she would be back in a couple minutes. Think back to the moment this (or something like it) happened in your life, and think about what happened next?

It probably started with a paper airplane that someone soared into the back of another's head. The spitball retaliation wouldn't be far behind, and soon erasers, pencils, wads of paper, and most any other foreign object that could be easily converted into a relatively harmless projectile, would enter into the classroom-wide mêlée that had engulfed you and your classmates. That is, of course, until Billy, standing at the door, utters those words, 'she's coming, she's coming!' As soon as Billy called out, everyone in the classroom would scamper back to their seats, area projectiles would be quickly gathered up and stuffed into desks, and the beautifully behaved fifth graders of Mrs. Stevens' class would be in perfect harmony by the time she walked through the door. Or, if you'd like a more recent example, when you were driving north on I-43 the other day, how much did your speed slow when you caught a glimpse of the police officer around the bend?

You see, it's easy to follow the rules, behave, or pay attention when you know the people you wish to obey or impress are watching. Having the motivation to do what we're supposed to do, when the people to whom we are accountable are right there before our eyes, is not that hard! The question, however, is how we are doing the rest of the time. And, that's the piece I think we sometimes miss in Zacchaeus. What has always bothered me, a little, about the story of Zacchaeus is the manner in which he is made into a hero for changing his errant behavior when faced with the presence of Jesus in his home, at his dinner table, and by his side. But, we never talk about the fact that this behavior never changed until he was face to face with the immediate presence of the Christ.

And, that's a reality we see reflected throughout the New Testament. There is a sense of urgency that was present in the preaching and writing that we have from the Apostles. Again and again throughout the New Testament, we hear the speakers and authors claiming that the audience should heed the call they are pronouncing. Why? Because, they claimed, the return of Jesus was soon to be upon them. They better shape up, get in line, pull it together, and live the life of faith because, in their minds, the second coming of the Christ was a literal occasion which was going to occur in their lifetime.

There's an old facetious statement in theological circles that says, 'Jesus is coming, hurry up and look busy.' This is the sentiment with which the Apostles wrote, and what I want to suggest is that this is precisely what Zacchaeus did. He lived his life on his terms, according to his agenda, in pursuit of his own benefit until the moment he was face to face with Son of God. It was not until that meeting, until Jesus came into his home, that Zacchaeus turned the proverbial new leaf. Now, I do not mean to diminish the meaning of Zacchaeus' story. I do not mean to take away all

of the messages of hope and promise which spring so sweetly from this story. And I don't mean to ignore the importance of making that decision to live in faith as Zacchaeus did. I do, however, have to wonder about the implications of Zacchaeus' story for the 21st century Church.

Zacchaeus, and many like him in the Gospels, are turned to a life of faith by a direct and personal confrontation with Jesus. Those of the Apostolic times, then, shortly after the death of Jesus, were driven into that life of faith, at least in part, by the expectation that Jesus would soon return to them and that they needed to be found acting in the proper manner. But we, in the 21st century Church, have seen two millennia pass by since the coming of Christ. Most people in our society have no expectation of a face to face confrontation with Jesus in this life, and most people in our society do not believe that the return of Christ, in whatever way they may view that event, is something that is going to happen in our lifetime.

And, that's really what the image of the bridegroom returning from the wedding can offer to the Church of today. Get beyond the attempts to define what it means to hold the oil, or what the oil might be. Look past the considerations of what it could mean to be 'locked out' of the banquet. And consider the form of these stories and the simple question they raise – are you ready? If Jesus were, much to our surprise, to return tomorrow, or even today, would you be comfortable being 'caught' at this very moment? Would Jesus find us 'awake?' Would Jesus find us with oil in our lamp? In other words, would Jesus discover us, his people, his Church, in a state we would want to be discovered? Are we behaving in a way that we would if we knew he were coming? Or are we throwing paper airplanes and running around the classroom hoping that the lookout will give us sufficient warning to pull ourselves together before he arrives?

What I mean to say by all this is that we, in the 21st century church, are trying to maintain the behavior of the 5th grade classroom without any expectation of the teacher returning any time soon. What I mean to say by all this is that we, in the 21st century Church, are left with the challenge of Zacchaeus making a change to his life before Jesus called him out of the tree.

- The truth is, my friends, that discipleship for us, today, is not based on some face-to-face experience with Christ.
- Discipleship, for us, is not driven by the fear of Godly vengeance as described in the Old Testament.
- And, discipleship for us, today, is not driven by a fear of the return Christ as announced recurrently in the Epistles, and exemplified in this story shared by Jesus himself.

Discipleship, for us, is based on faith. Discipleship, for us, is about responding to the grace of Christ simply due to the nature of our relationship with God in Christ. What I mean to say by all this is that, discipleship, for those of us in the 21st century church, ultimately, is about doing behind Christ's back what we would most certainly do if we found ourselves in his immediate physical presence. Because we, the 21st century Christians, are compelled to act on a discipleship grounded only in our understanding of the grace of God shown to us in Jesus Christ – not on some face to face experience of being called to the carpet by Jesus himself! So, what I want to suggest is that we must always ask ourselves if we are behaving in each moment in the same way as we would if Christ were physically by our side. When we can answer yes to that question, when we can affirm that we are acting behind his back in the same manner we would face-to-face, we are awake, our oil is full, our lamps are lit, and we can rejoice that the faith we

celebrate in Zacchaeus is the faith in which we live every day. But, when the answer is no, when the truth is that the things we do would be different if Jesus were doing them with us, then maybe, just maybe, we need to follow Zacchaeus' lead and make a change.