

Welcome Home
Luke 19:10
Sunday, October 25, 2025

This scripture comes at the end of the story of Zacchaeus. Most of y'all know that story. Zacchaeus was a tax collector. As such, he was a complete outcast, considered a traitor to his people, the Jews, and the worst sort of sinners. But he wants to see Jesus, so he climbs a tree (because he was, after all, a wee little man, and a wee little man was he). Jesus looks up, calls him down, and says he's going to have lunch with this horrible sinner. Zacchaeus then repents of his greed, saying he'll give away half of what he owns and he'll repay those he has cheated four times over. At which point, today's scripture quotes Jesus as saying he came to seek and to save the lost. Zacchaeus was lost, and Jesus came to save him.

And in this little bit of scripture, we see Jesus' mission: to seek and to save the lost. And the salvation he brought isn't just, or even primarily, going to heaven when we die. It is primarily the living of a new, abundant, bountiful, and eternal kind of life right now; a life animated by God's own Spirit; a life lived in God's own love, hope, peace, and joy, now, and for eternity. Jesus came to bring that new, born-again kind of life into the world, and he came so that life could be shared with everyone.

And, since those of us who follow Christ are the *body* of Christ—Jesus' current embodiment in the world—Jesus' mission is our mission: to spread the Good News of New Life in Jesus Christ.

So, how do we fulfill that mission? Well, as I tell you every week in the benediction, a big part of it is actually living out our faith. Living out God's love, hope, peace and joy in the midst of a

world that is anything but, so people will notice. It's living differently; living so people say to themselves, "I want to get me some of that."

But, at some point, we're going to need to explain what it is we've got.

So, how do we do that? Well, there are lots and lots of ways, but today I want to focus on one of the most important ways: invitation. We can invite them to experience Jesus. We can invite them to come with us to a Bible study or Sunday School class. We can invite them to our Discipleship group, or one of the community events we put on, like Trunk or Treat. But maybe the most important invitation we can give them is the invitation to worship with us on Sunday mornings.

And I want to be clear, this isn't about padding our attendance numbers. You can ask Tammye in the office. I don't really care about the worship numbers ... at least until it's time for the District Superintendent to visit! What I do care about is that as many people as possible learn about God's love for us as expressed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Now, I'd say most people, at least here in the United States, have heard of Jesus. But, quite frankly, what a lot of them have heard is nonsense. So many people, both within and outside of the church, have been exposed to a distorted understanding of who Jesus is and what he stands for. And so, the reason I want you to invite people to worship with *us* is that I want us together to expose them to the real Jesus; the Jesus who summarized all of the scriptures in two rules: love God with all you've got and love everyone as you love yourself; the Jesus who offers them a new kind of life.

And that starts with us being the right kind of church. Did you know that from Jesus' perspective, there are only two kinds of churches. Now, some of you are probably thinking, "Of course, conservative and liberal." But that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about inward facing and outward facing.

Some churches, both conservative and liberal, face inward. They ask questions like, "What can the church do to make *me* feel more comfortable."

Others, again, both conservative and liberal, face outward. They ask questions like, "What *can I and the church* do to seek and save the lost." In other words, the outward facing church is aligned with Jesus' mission, while the inward facing church is aligned with ... well, something else.

So, the first step in being an outward facing church is to connect with the lost and invite them to learn about Jesus. So, how do we do that? Well, there are about as many ways as there are people in this room. It could be social media. It could be one-on-one conversations with other parents at the kids' sports activities. It might be conversations with work acquaintances.

And, if we're paying attention, we'll come to recognize that there are times in people's lives when they're actually looking for Jesus, whether they know it or not; times when people are particularly open to exploring the new kind of life that Jesus has to offer. You can tell it by the three "nots."

The first "not," "I'm not from here." This more than likely means someone is looking to be part of a community. And there is no better community than a community of faith built on the love and belonging of Jesus.

The second “not” is, “Things are not going well.” This suggests that someone is actively looking for peace, comfort, or hope in their life; the kind of peace, comfort, and hope that can only truly be found in Jesus.

And, the third “not,” “I’m living through something I’m not prepared for.” For example, someone may be about to have their first child, or they may find themselves unexpectedly caring for a loved one. This is someone, again, who’s looking for comfort or peace in the midst of chaos. And, as many of you know from experience, that’s the kind of peace that’s found in Jesus.

The three “nots” are almost like a cry for help, a cry for something or someone to help them through a difficult time. A perfect opportunity to invite them to come with you to worship.

So, let’s say you’ve done that. You’ve invited them to come sit with you in worship. Or let’s say you see someone who has just randomly showed up to check us out. What do you do then? How do we really welcome them. How do we show them real hospitality?

And the reason I ask about hospitality is that it is *very* important. Some of the biggest churches in the country have done internal polling to determine what visitors find most important when they visit a church. Now, as you might guess, my first thought is that it’s got to be the quality of the preaching, right? That’s got to be at the top of the list. Or maybe it’s the music. But if you thought that, you’d be wrong. The most important thing for someone who’s visiting—the thing that is most likely to determine whether they’ll come back—is how we make them feel. Do we make them feel really welcome. Do we make them feel as if we are genuinely happy they’re here?

So, that's the question for us. How do we make people feel? How do we show them that we're genuinely happy they're here? Well, I'd like to suggest three things that represent a truly welcoming attitude.

First is the attitude of "others come first." Last week, our Paul preached on chapter 2 of Paul the apostle's letter to the Philippians, which is about having the mind of Christ; the mind of a servant. The idea is that, as I said before, the church isn't here for my comfort. It's here, and I'm here, to make things comfortable for those who are seeking a relationship with Jesus.

Second, and closely related, is the idea of going above and beyond expectations. So, for example, as a visitor, I might expect that if I ask where the coffee is, someone might point to the sign that says, "coffee this way" and maybe say under my breath, "duh." (Don't do that.) Or that they might point down the hall to the kitchen and say, "that way." What I probably wouldn't expect would be that they would walk me down the hallway to the coffee pots, maybe taking the opportunity to introduce themselves and strike up a little conversation. Put yourself in the other person's shoes. What would make you happy and comfortable to be here?

Third, to be truly welcoming and hospitable, we've got to really and truly believe that *everyone* belongs here. It's fairly easy to be hospitable to those who look like us, think like us, and act like us. But that's not the extent of Jesus' call on us. Most of us are familiar with the saying, "The church isn't a museum for saints, it's a hospital for sinners." It's just another way of saying what Jesus says in today's scripture: Jesus came—and we as his body in the world today are here—to seek and to save the lost—the folks who don't know about the new kind of life Jesus came to bring. And the fact is, a lot of those folks look, think, and act differently than most of us in this room. We need to have the attitude that despite those differences, they belong

here. And, in fact, we need to realize that those differences might just make all of us together more effective in sharing the Good News of New Life in Jesus Christ.

Now, I want to be clear once again on why I'm talking about invitation and hospitality. It would be easy to conclude it's all about the numbers; all about filling up the sanctuary. It isn't. It's about connecting people with the source of true life. The reason I want us to be inviting and hospitable is because this is a place where people can find Jesus; where they can learn to follow Jesus; where they can internalize the message that God loves them; where the hurting can find wholeness; where they can find God and themselves. And as far as I'm concerned, that's what this faith thing is all about.