

The Welcome Guest

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee

October 30, 2016

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C

Luke 19:1-10



I knew a person a couple of years ago who was sitting in a hospital room alone with his grandfather, a couple of thousand miles from his home. He was feeling pretty lonely, trying to think of who he could call, when an old high school friend came to mind he hadn't talked to in years. He grabbed his cell phone to dial 411, and his phone rang. He didn't recognize the number. "Hello." It was his friend. "I was just thinking about you, and realized we hadn't talked in a while, said his friend."

"Well, you won't believe this, but I'm in town with my grandfather in the hospital."

"I'll come right over."

He called it a "God moment."

I know. I know. Some of you might be thinking, "How's that possible? Too much of a coincidence." I don't know. I'm just passing along what he said. "A God moment."

I've told you all before about how difficult and dangerous our daughter's birth was, and how, while Kim was still in surgery and none of us knew how she was, I was holding Chandler Belle and looking out the window of St. Francis Hospital in Memphis, and there was a rainbow. And I said, "Thank you God." I had no idea how this was all going to turn out, but that ancient promise reminded me of who was sovereign.

I know. I know. It was June, there had been a light rain, the sun shines through the water and refracts the light spectrum. I know. I'm just passing it along. It happened. I saw it as a God moment.

And then there was that time someone told me about a camel going right through the eye of a needle. Just squeezed right through and out the other side. Strangest thing. A God moment.

We have heard lots of tax collector stories in Luke. Remember last week and the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector, the Pharisee giving thanks to God that he was no tax collector, while the collector in question stands off to the side, begging for mercy. They are prominent figures in ancient Judaism at the time of Jesus. They were the intermediaries who collected the hated tax imposed on the people by the Romans, and the way they made their money was by imposing even more than Rome required and pocketing the difference. No Jew worth his salt gave the time of day to a tax collector.

And Zacchaeus was the *chief* tax collector in the little town of Jericho. The chief. He was wealthy, probably the wealthiest man by far in the town, and the hatred he received was most likely in proportion to his wealth.

Jesus is coming through town. His fame precedes him. There's a large crowd, people jostling for position. Zacchaeus is a short man, and a hated man, in a crowd of people. It doesn't take much imagination to see him getting a little roughed up in that crowd, nothing blatant, just an elbow here or there, a bump, and certainly no one was clearing the way and saying, "Please, Zacchaeus, come on up here, we'll make room so you can see."

But he's a persistent little man. Persistence is another of those Lukan themes. Remember the widow beating on the door of the unjust judge from a couple of weeks ago? Zacchaeus wants to see, he's determined to see, so he does something completely undignified for a man of his status. He climbs up in the sycamore tree.

And there he sits, little legs dangling, hoping no one sees him, completely vulnerable to the jeers and laughter of the crowd. And there in that space he's vulnerable to something else as well – being seen by the one he came to see. He's hard to miss up there in that tree, and Jesus doesn't miss him.

Jesus sees him. Had it been me, as soon as he made eye contact I would have wanted to disappear into the leaves of the tree. Now Zacchaeus has been found out. Now he has been seen.

And there in front of God and everybody, Jesus invites himself to Zacchaeus's home, to be his guest. Right there, in that moment, Jesus confers a dignity on Zacchaeus that he did not know he had. The crowd murmurs, but no matter. The word of Jesus has changed Zacchaeus, or perhaps it is better to say, the word of Jesus has helped Zacchaeus come to himself, realize the worth God had given him all along, and realize that he could live out of that worth.

And there's only one thing that can happen when you recognize God sees you as worthy, when Jesus invites himself over to your house – joy. It is joy that overcomes Zacchaeus, joy that motivates him to repent of all he has done, joy that issues forth a payback that becomes so much more than payback, but instead an extravagant generosity. The joy of being seen as God sees him, of having his vision aligned with God's vision. Joy. Salvation doesn't come to his house because he repented and became generous; he repented and became generous because salvation came to his house.

While another rich man in Luke's gospel, just a few verses ago, walked away sad from Jesus' invitation to follow, you remember what Jesus said, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom?" And when the disciples hear it, they are astonished and say, "Then who can be saved?" And we all around here know Jesus' response. "For humans it is impossible, but not for God. For with God, all things are possible." Zacchaeus is the miracle. Zacchaeus is the sign.

This is what the Protestant reformers that we celebrate today tried to help us recover; a sense that God's grace, this being seen by God, is a gift, that God treasures us, God sees us, and God alone saves us, gives us worth, because we are all children of God.

I know. I know. Phone call from a friend you were just thinking of, rainbows in the Memphis sky at the birth of a child, Jesus just happens to pass through Jericho, and Zacchaeus just happens to be up in the tree, and suddenly he is a welcome guest – uncontained joy, over-flowing generosity. Camel through the eye of a needle. A God moment.

I know. I know. Impossible. I suppose so, for us. But hey, I'm just passing it along. Amen.