

“Radical Hospitality”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
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**Luke 19: 1-10**

Let’s face it: this famous story from Luke is one of our favorites. We’ve heard it told since we were children, how “Zacchaeus was a wee little man” who climbed the tree to see Jesus come into Jericho.

That’s usually as far as we go with the story, because the primary thing we remember about Zacchaeus is that he was short. The poor guy was probably the butt of many jokes around town because of his small stature. But despite his lack of height, he showed determination to find a way to see the Lord. He found that sycamore tree, scaled it, and assumed his perch like a bird. No matter what, he would overcome any obstacles to see this man who many were calling the Messiah.

And Jesus doesn’t disappoint us with his choosing of the underdog. He spots Zacchaeus up in that tree, calls him down, and tells him he wants to come to his house for dinner. With this, Zacchaeus is overwhelmed with joy, and treats the master with a meal worthy of a king. This is probably the portrait that comes to mind when we hear this story from Luke. It’s a story of God’s grace shown to those who are underprivileged or not blessed with the greatest physical attributes. But as we will see, there is much more to this “wee little man” and to this story that what we learned in our first-grade Sunday School class.

To begin with, this story is only found in the Gospel of Luke. The Gospel writer uses the term “chief tax collector” to describe Zacchaeus, a phrase which is not found in the rest of the New Testament. As the chief tax collector, Zacchaeus would have been in control of the Roman taxation system for that region, a very corrupt organization within the Roman Empire. The city of Jericho was a major center of commerce, with several trading routes extending eastward. Very likely, Zacchaeus had a great deal of power and influence over the economic activity in that city.

To further complicate matters, Zacchaeus was a Jew. There is a good chance that he or one of his associates had cheated almost everyone in the crowd that day who had gathered to see Jesus. And because he was a fellow Jew, most of the crowd no doubt felt as if Zacchaeus had betrayed them by his involvement in the Roman government. I suppose it’s not surprising that he would find a tree to climb: not only so he could see Jesus, but also so that no one could see him!

Zacchaeus was not an upright individual in his native Jericho. He was disliked, even despised, by those in his community. Sure, he was a short man who we like to feel sympathy for every time we read this story. The reality, though, is that he was not only looked down upon because he was short, but primarily because he had turned on his fellow Jewish brothers and sisters by taxing them mercilessly. It’s no real surprise that the crowd reacted the way it did: “All who saw it began to

grumble and said, ‘He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner’” (19:7). And can you really blame them?

You’ve been standing in the hot sun for hours, waiting for this great man named Jesus to arrive. And then, when he does come, instead of inviting you or an honest neighbor of yours to join him for a meal, he picks the cheat and betrayer in town. What kind of Messiah is this Jesus? How can he invite himself into the life of a “sinner” in the crowd, and not invite one of us? Why him and not me?

We ask this question all the time, don’t we? Someone blows by us on the interstate, so we speed up a little. The next thing we know, a cop has pulled us over for speeding, while the other joker is nowhere in sight. Why did he get away and not me?

We may ask this question in our car on the highway, or we may ask it in a hospital waiting room. Your baby is born with serious developmental problems, while the couple next door has a healthy child born to them. You could be laid off from your work of twenty faithful years, while the person with the same amount of experience as you is promoted up the company ladder. Your house could be burglarized three times in six months, while your friend in an adjoining neighborhood is never threatened. Why him and not me?

It’s when we face that question and wrestle with it that we come face-to-face with the radical nature of Luke’s Gospel. As one commentator writes: *By announcing a visit to Zacchaeus’s house, Jesus forces the crowd to see this tax collector with new eyes. It is not a pretty sight, apparently, for they cannot stop grumbling about it, and about the fact that Jesus would stoop to sharing hospitality with such a person. Nonetheless, Jesus refuses to be bound by labels. Where they see selfishness, Jesus sees welcome. Where they see an outsider, Jesus sees a member of the family. Where they see lost, Jesus sees found. Jesus knows the good and the bad truth about Zacchaeus; when the labels are stripped away, there can be no pretense. And still Jesus invites himself over for dinner. Hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.*

*Zacchaeus has no time to beautify his place, no time to fix a special meal, no opportunity to make his home look like anything other than what it is. Jesus is coming for dinner. Today. Right now. The rejected tax collector is playing host to the redeeming Son of Humanity.*

*That is how salvation works. We do not have to put things in order first, because salvation is not about being neat and orderly. It is not about making things look good, not about what we do, not about fitting into the world’s stereotypes; it’s not about the good or bad labels by which we are known to ourselves or others. Before even announcing his newfound spirit of generosity and restitution, Zacchaeus learns that Jesus is coming to see him. Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost (Audrey West, “House Calls,” *Christian Century*, October 16, 2007, 23).*

The lost includes everyone under the sun. It includes those who are poor, and those who are rich. It includes those who are accepted, and those who are not. It includes those who are welcomed, and those who are turned away. The lost includes you and me, them and us – all who are created in the image of God our

Creator. Jesus is calling to us up in that tree, and in so doing, urges us to invite others down to break bread around the table he has set before us. “For the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost.” That is a radical notion of hospitality which stretches us in all sorts of ways.

I’ve reflected on that a good bit this week as our family celebrated the life of my great aunt, Adeline Ostwalt. Debbie, Erin, Heather and I travelled to Davidson, North Carolina, this week for her funeral on Wednesday. Adeline was my grandmother’s sister, but in truth she was like a second-grandmother for me. She was my home-away-from-home throughout my four years of college, and she was present when both of our girls were born in Charlotte. This was a time and service our family needed to attend, and I am thankful for the support and assistance of Lisa, Kim, and so many of you which allowed us to be gone this week.

As I think about radical hospitality, I think of Adeline. At her core, she was hospitable – cooking meals, sharing her beautiful flowers with those who were sick, going out of her way to welcome new residents to her retirement home. But when you include the adjective “radical” to hospitality, I think of her, too.

That’s because Adeline saw the value and goodness in all of God’s children, and she lived everyday of her life seeking to honor that belief. She was an educator her whole life – first as a certified Christian Educator in the Presbyterian Church, and then as a teacher and principal in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public School system. And it was during her years in public education that desegregation took place. She was the only white teacher – heck, the only white person – in an all-black elementary school in Davidson. And it was through that experience – dare I say, alone in a sycamore tree – that she knew what it felt like to be in the minority, and how we are called to show respect and care to all God’s children.

She modeled that respect to her students, her teachers, and to her community – to the point that her students did not see her as their “white” teacher, but as their teacher. The story which epitomizes this is when Adeline’s late husband, Jay, came into her classroom one day to help her with something. One of Adeline’s students came up to her and said, “Mrs. Ostwalt, is that man your boyfriend?” Adeline responded, “No, he’s not my boyfriend. That man is my husband.” To which the little boy replied, “But Mrs. Ostwalt, that man can’t be your husband. He’s white.” And as the pastor commented at Adeline’s funeral on Wednesday, “She was honored that the children that she taught were not able to see a difference, that they saw themselves all as a part of one humanity” (Lib McGreggor Simmons, Memorial Service, Davidson College Presbyterian Church, Davidson, North Carolina, September 7, 2011). That is the heart of God’s salvation. That is the heart of radical hospitality.

Let us be thankful that Jesus came to seek out and save all the lost, including our very selves, and may we respond to our Savior’s invitation with humility and joy as God’s salvation comes calling to us and to this world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.