

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

Three weeks ago, Debbie, Heather and I made a quick trip to the Boston-area. It was a chance for Heather to make a couple of college visits on her fall break, and for us to see another part of the country that is beautiful and stunning at this time of the year. We were in Boston for less than 48 hours, but during that time we not only visited two colleges - we also got to see one of our church’s college students, Kelsey Merrill, who is a sophomore at MIT. It was a quick visit, but it was wonderful to see Kelsey in a setting that suits her so well.

The other thing that we were invited to during our trip was a Sukkot Dinner. One of Debbie’s colleagues, a fellow hospital chaplain and CPE supervisor, lives in the Boston-area with her family. They are Jewish, and when Debbie asked her about the possibility of us staying with them during our visit, her friend indicated that that was Sukkot, or the Feast of Booths, so they would likely have extended family staying with them. But Beth, Debbie’s friend, enthusiastically invited us to join them for the meal - it was so enthusiastic we didn’t really feel like we could refuse!

So, what is Sukkot? It is a week-long festival as outlined in the Book of Leviticus. In Leviticus 23, it states that on “the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the produce of the land, you shall keep the festival of the Lord, lasting seven days” (23:39). To mark this festival, the people are instructed “to live in booths for seven days; all that are citizens of Israel shall live in booths, so that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt” (23:42-43). As Debbie’s friend said, it’s a happy Jewish festival to remember God’s protection of the Israelites during the forty years of exodus in the wilderness.

So, after a long day, where for us three introverts we would have probably preferred to have gone to the hotel and sleep, we accepted Beth’s invitation and knocked on their door. And I am so glad that we did. We were warmly welcomed by Beth and her husband, Barry, their three sons, Jonathan, Gabriel, and Aaron, as well as another family who were close friends of Beth and Barry. All eleven of us ate outside under the Sukkah, a tent in their backyard, symbolizing the booths that the Israelites used in the wilderness. The children led the opening prayers and liturgy, and before we ate, we passed around a bowl and pitcher of water to ritually wash our hands before the meal. The meal was a feast of over twelve dishes, all of which recalled the grains and produce

which is native to Israel. It was a night full of not only delicious food, but truly nourishing conversation and an encounter with the holy and sacred – a very humbling experience indeed.

Since that night, I've thought often of what we would have missed had we not accepted Beth's invitation to join them for Sukkot. We were tired and didn't have a lot of energy to engage with people. We could have politely declined and made an excuse why we couldn't have attended. But if we had done that, we would have missed so much: namely, the opportunity to participate in another religion's holiday we may never get to experience. And what was even more humbling was how they were not hesitant or protective of their rites and rituals. Instead, they wanted us to feel at ease and learn why this night was so important to their faith. Their gracious invitation deepened my faith in ways I could not have anticipated.

How do we extend invitations to others? It can be well-thought out, with a card or a phone call or a personal conversation, inviting someone to an event several days or weeks in advance. It can be a spur-of-the-moment sort of thing, where we're with a friend or stranger, and ask them to join us in what we are about to do. It can be to join us at an event; it can be to join us as part of a group; it can be to work alongside us toward a project. Most of the time, when we extend an invitation, especially to something we are hosting, we have given it some considerable thought and planning. And there is an element of risk involved, for we don't necessarily know whether the invitee will accept our invitation.

In this familiar story from Luke, Jesus is walking through Jericho. As he is doing so, he stops what he is doing, looks up in a tree, and sees a man named Zacchaeus. Jesus picks him out of the crowd, makes eye contact with him, and extends an invitation, saying, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." Zacchaeus hurried down from his perch, "and was happy to welcome Jesus." The Lord invited himself into the life of one of his children, and that child did not reject him, but welcomed him with gratitude and repentance.

Throughout the gospels, we witness Jesus inviting himself into people's lives. He invites the first disciples – Peter, Andrew, James and John – to leave their fishing nets and follow him (Matthew 4:18-22). He invites Philip and Nathanael in a similar manner in John's Gospel (John 1:43-51). In our story today, Zacchaeus is another example of Jesus extending a personal invitation. As one commentator notes: *This divine calling by Jesus is not whimsical; rather, this is the vocation of God to call persons out of sinfulness into his glorious light. John Calvin suggests that encountering Jesus in this manner, as the Word of God, is to commune with the light of God and reflect the glory of God . . . Jesus*

*calls out to Zacchaeus, and in doing so he initiates salvation* (Robert Leach, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2010: 262*).

In this story, we see the fullness and power of incarnation. God is not satisfied to pass through the crowds and leave the lost behind. God is not satisfied to accept the judgment of the crowds, who grumble that “Jesus has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” God has intentionally come into this world, in the person and work of Jesus Christ, “to seek out and to save the lost.” God is always seeking, always searching, always calling out to the crowd, always making eye contact, always inviting himself into the lives of you, me, all of us sinners. God is not satisfied until all have been sought, all have been found, and salvation comes to everyone’s house.

God is always inviting himself into our lives, and Zacchaeus is our example for how to receive and welcome the Lord’s invitation. Very simply, he comes down out of his safe haven in the tree and stands with Jesus. His actions teach us that there is always a human response to the gracious word of our Lord. This redirection is evident in Zacchaeus as his attitude toward his fellow human beings changes. Without being prompted or coerced, Zacchaeus entrusts half of his estate to the poor and commits himself to making fourfold restitution to those against whom he has sinned (19:8). Thus, Calvin says that Zacchaeus is “changed from a wolf not only into a sheep, but even into a shepherd.” Zacchaeus is coming into alignment with the word of God as a new creation (ibid).

At this table, we are invited by God to share in his incarnational love. This is not a table which has barriers around it, either physical or spiritual. This is not a table which excludes people from making eye contact with God. This is not a table which succumbs to grumbling or dissent or petty judgment. This is a table where all who are seeking God are found. This is a table where all who are yearning to be invited are welcomed. This is a table where God is always within our reach, and God will feed us unconditionally through the bread of life and the cup of eternal salvation.

It’s easy to slip into the mindset of the crowds, to grumble, to doubt that God would want to be invited into some people’s lives. It’s tempting to look inward, to be self-protective, and keep politely refusing the invitations of others – even if it’s God who’s extending the invitation.

Funny thing about that, though? God never stops inviting. God never stops looking up in the tree. God never ceases to welcome himself into our lives. Why? Because the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost. Yes, the lost we can easily name and label in this world. But also the lost souls who we see when we look in the mirror – the sinners who are in desperate need of salvation.

How might we respond to the Lord's invitation? When we are talking to a neighbor, and we hear them say they wish they had a church home, are we moved to invite them? When we are asked to help with an important task, because others see in us the gifts needed to accomplish that task, are we moved to help so that others might be touched by God's incarnational love? When the opportunity arises to mend a broken relationship, are we moved to forgive just as God has forgiven us in Jesus Christ?

As people of faith, we are extended an invitation by God each and every day - God will never stop inviting himself into our lives. The revelation of our faith is how we respond to the Lord's invitation. Are we joyful and grateful like Zacchaeus, showing abundant hospitality to God and neighbor? Are we resentful and inward-focused, refusing to believe that the Lord's invitation is extended beyond us good folk? Are we moved to pay it forward, so that the Lord's invitation might be extended to all those who are lost and are seeking to be found?

Thanks be to God for his incarnational love in Jesus Christ. Amen.